

SYLVAN HOLT'S
DAUGHTER.

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AUTHOR OF "KATHIE BEANDE," "GILBERT MASSENGER," "THORNEY HALL," ETC.

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TO

ELIZABETH ISHERWOOD WILLIAMSON

This Story

IS

AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

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SYLVAN HOLT'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

WILDWOOD GRANGE AND ITS MASTER.

WHEN the great Langland estates were dismembered early in the present century, Wildwood was bought by one Sylvan Holt. Upon the farm there was a spacious house, very ruinous, styled the Grange, which he repaired, and where he took up his abode. Whoever built it originally must have had a loving eye for the picturesque; nowhere in all Mirkdale could a finer site for extent and beauty of prospect have been found. Even in midwinter, when the snow lay a foot deep upon the hills, and the hollows were drifted full as frozen lakes: when the loud north wind was at its mad Christmas gambols in the woods, and the great pine branches bent and swayed beneath their sparkling weight of winter fruitage, it was beautiful!

It had the first glimpse of dawn in the yellow east, and the last dim purple reflection of sunset in the gorgeous west. When the luscious summer lay panting and athirst in the bosom of the dale, cool zephyrs, forgotten of the spring, revelled there freely. While the snow was still lying under the black shadow of its patriarchal oaks and cedars, outstanding sentinels of Wildwood, the violets were opening amongst the moss in the sunny south borders; when the valley was filled with a rolling tide of mist, it rose clear above the dun haze; and when storms were abroad, they rioted grandly round the exposed and gusty scaur, tossing the strong boughs that crowned it like dishevelled, elfish locks.

Lower down in the dale were many sweet sheltered nooks, where others might have chosen to nestle their homes, but the

isolation of this lonely old eyrie, perched on the craggy edge of the moor and remote from any public road, had been its chief recommendation in the eyes of Sylvan Holt. It presented to the valley a long, irregular, dark grey front, weather-worn by the storms of nearly three centuries, and ingrained with variously tinted mosses and lichens. It was roofed with heavy flagstones, which can alone withstand the tempestuous blasts of this hill-country; and under the eaves, and even in the porch itself, were colonies of swallows' nests, to which the old birds returned year after year. If any curious stranger had rashly proposed to examine near at hand the quaint, many-gabled house, he would most likely have been warned off in some such terms as the following:—

“Yo'd better not! t' master'll set t' dogs on yo': he'd threap down auld Nick hissel' if he cam i' his gate, wad yon Sylvan Holt!” which warning would have suggested a tolerably correct epitome of the Squire's savage, misanthropic character, and also of the reputation in which Mirkdale held him.

The horizon was girdled by hills upheaved in long dusky billows against the sky; heathery swells, skirted by rugged little pasture fields, sloped steeply to the beck, and the tangled glades of Wildwood, from which much of the farm lands had once been redeemed, stretched almost to the walls of the Grange. There was no garden, properly so called, but merely a pretty plain place, unenclosed from the moor on the one hand, and the woods on the other, but laid down with turf which time had made as soft and mossy as velvet; a few dwarfed fruit-trees grew on the sunny side of the house, and below the parlour windows there was a narrow border planted with turfs of primrose, violet, and other flowers, which Sylvan Holt's daughter Margaret had dug up from the sheltered roots in the forest.

CHAPTER II.

SYLVAN HOLT'S DAUGHTER.

THE said Margaret had come to the Grange when but three years old, and since that date she had been growing up as

wild and almost as ignorant, as a colt in the heather. Sylvan Holt regretted bitterly that she had not been born a boy, and therefore did his utmost in every way to remedy the mistake. He set his face steadily against her learning any kind of woman's work, from the plain sewing into which Jacky, their sole female servant, would fain have initiated her, to the accomplishments of music and French, which Mrs. Joan Clervaux, down at Oakfield, had compassionately volunteered to teach.

Margaret had a fine natural intelligence, but it was certainly in the rough. She could thread the remotest tracks of the moor blindfold; was in the secrets of the sheltered little hollows where the heather bloomed first and faded last; she knew every shady glen and sunstreaked glade in Wildwood; knew the nooks where grew the greatest profusion of flowers; knew when the various trees opened and shed their leaves; in what month the note of every bird that visited Mirkdale was to be heard, and what places each delighted to haunt. She was also conversant with Jacky's north-country songs, legends, and traditions—for Jacky adhered to what she was pleased to style "t'auld faith," and was rich in such romantic lore; add to this that she could read—and loved reading when the volume suited her—that she could write and spell tolerably, could sing in a sweet untaught fashion, back any horse in her father's stables, and make his flies when he fished up Blackbeck, and the list of her accomplishments is complete.

Let her not, however, be rashly prejudged a hoyden: for nature seemed to have intended her originally for one of the better end of womankind. She was now a fine, well-grown girl of seventeen: strong and hardy from her free out-door life, but naturally graceful in person; and with a face whose pure, soft, healthy blush was beauty-proof against the harsh mountain winds. She was never loud-voiced or boisterous: indeed, unless there was something remarkable to excite animation, her manners were rather indolently calm than otherwise.

Profoundly as Sylvan Holt was disappointed in her sex, she was truly the delight of his eyes: he thought there was nothing in the world to compare with her. Though savagely sarcastic and even brutal to people in general, to her he was always loving, tender, and considerate. He had sustained one cruel, terrible wrong in life which had turned his blood to gall; but she kept a sentient wholesome spot of humanity warm in his heart's core. It was odd to hear him come in from rating

Anty in the fold-yard or Jacky in the kitchen, and then to see him fondle Margaret; calling her his cooing ringdove, his bonnie skylark, his wild, unbroken filly. He would have her out with him to follow the fox-hounds and harriers, to tramp at his side when he went grouse-shooting on the moors or visited the wide-lying sheep-walks of his farm; he made her, indeed, as companionable as he could have done had she been really a son instead of a daughter; and Margaret returned his absorbed, one-ideal love with a canine fidelity of attachment that could see no fault in its object. His stormy brows, his harsh angry voice, had never inspired her with dread: for her slightest glance, even the ring of her foot upon the floor, hushed his most unreasonable moods; and she clung to him with a yearning and passionate fondness like that which in after years ever and always made her heart warm to the remembrance of her home at Wildwood.

There was a vein of idle contemplativeness in Margaret's character which made it rather a complex one to understand. With a Leghorn hat, covering her wealth of short brown curls, a plaid over her shoulders, and her favourite dog, Oscar—a magnificent brindled staghound as tall as a donkey—close at her heels, she would ramble about the moor or Wildwood from morning till night; sitting down to rest and bask in the sun when weary, and returning home at twilight luxuriously contented with the manner in which she had spent her day. She was a very innocent, guileless, happy creature. Yet Mrs. Joan Clervaux waved her head dolorously over her feminine shortcomings, and read her many a serious lecture on the duty of employing her time more judiciously; but hitherto this duty had not come home to Margaret: she liked her life very well as she found it, and was much more intent on enjoying than improving it.

CHAPTER III.

A MAY MORNING.

THAT year Mirkdale did not put off its winter weeds till May was come. Eerie and mournful winds went wandering up and

down the naked fells; in lonely hollows, in dim pine woods, on pale blanched Christmas peaks the March sprites lingered still: their voices thrilled keen and bitter through the winter nights, and breathed a chill monotony over the long and sunless days. A shroud of grey sky lay close on the hill tops, a sullen vapour wavered below. Blackbeck, swollen by the rains and melting snows in the loftier regions where it had its source, rushed and eddied over its pebbly bed with frantic foaming violence; the ford by which Margaret was used to cross to church was become a turbid impassable torrent, and the wooden footbridge a mile below had been swept away. The steepes of Litton Fell and Fernbro' showed brown and bare through clouding mists, and the low-lying fields in the bottom of the dale wore a uniform tint of dull and lifeless green. The long torpor of a dreadful winter hung lethargic on the paralysed limbs of nature: her sleep was heavy as the sleep of Death,—her waking seemed still afar off.

Day by day, Margaret had persevered in her rambles, though the tracks across the moor were almost morass, and the woodwalks dripped damp from every bough. One after another she had seen the flowers peep shyly up from last year's fallen leaves and perish, rain-beaten and crushed. Her heart thirsted for the genial spring: she wanted to see the sunshine and swift shadows flitting in their noiseless chase over the dark hills, the russet moors, the pleasant meadows; to see the larches hang forth their brilliant emerald tassels, and to feel the perfumed breath of flowers on a more kindly and balmy air.

As if in gracious answer to her longing, spring came in shining raiment up to Wildwood on her birthday. Jacky woke her with the news. "Eh, Marg'ret!" cried she, "Fernbro's pulled off his night-cap at last, and here's old Mrs. Joan Clervaux's sent to bid you down to her house this afternoon to drink tea. Shall I say yo'll go? T' lad's waiting."

"Stop, Jacky, where is my father?"

"He was awa' to Middlemoor market afore six o'clock."

"Then send word that I will go. Open the window, Jacky—what a glorious, glorious sunshine!"

Jacky set the lattice wide, and put out her hand to feel the air: "All's fair laughing an' singing for joy like t' little hills i' t' scripture," said she: "hark to t' birds, Marg'ret, an' to t' beck brattling ower t' stones—that's the clapping o' hands:

I'd be fain to be young an' get a holiday mysel'; but I ha' to wesh, an' to bake, an' what not."

"Let the baking and washing alone, Jacky, and ask Anty's wife up to dinner for company."

"An' what'll master say to sic' like daft doings? Me an' Anty's wife is doddered auld bodies 'ut can't bide his threap-ing: he put me in a bonnie quandary this morning afore he started; I ain't gotten ower it yet."

"What was he angry about, Jacky?"

"About nought in particular 'ut I can speak on. He'd tum'led out o' t' wrang side o' his bed as he oft does, an' was as cross as Nick's hat-band. It's a gude thing for some o' us his bark's waur nor his bite." And grinning ruefully, Jacky went away with Margaret's message.

Then Margaret got up. Her toilette was quick and simple; it began with a complete drench of stinging cold water, which made her firm, smooth, glossy skin glow and tingle, and it ended in the donning of a maize-coloured china silk dress prettily embroidered, that had been a present from Mrs. Joan Clervaux a few months before. As she opened her door to go down stairs, Oscar, who had been lying in wait for her on the mat, jumped up with his customary boisterous caresses, and then stalked off before her into the porch, as if inviting her to come out and taste the delicious May morning in all its dewy freshness. She followed, and stayed long gazing up and down the dale, with that delicious, indefinable exhilaration throbbing at her heart which is, perhaps, youth's greatest riches. She felt obliged to give it expression, and said aloud to the stag-hound, who was gratefully snuffing up the warm air, as if he too enjoyed the change of weather—

"I feel all glorious, Oscar! don't you?" to which he responded in dog fashion, with a short bark and a heavy flourish of his great tail.

So different was the aspect of the valley since nature had lifted up her dejected brow, and her veil of fogs and sleety rains was rent away, that it appeared to be the magical work of genii of enchantment, who had done their spiriting in the dead of night, while all the world slept. The opposite hills seemed to have approached nearer; the undulations, and various growths and tintings of their surface were quite distinct; along their ridge firwoods; sloping westward to Fernbro', vast tracts of heath and whins; below, fields green as emerald, with

here and there a patch of dark brown cornland, where the blade was scarce yet above the ground. Columns of smoke drifted and eddied skywards from the lime-kilns amongst the hills, and wavering, vaporous clouds, scattered apart, and hanging in mid air, marked where were clustered many household fires—cares of man dimming God's morning. Near at hand to admire was the rich, soft velvety darkness of the branching cedars and firs; the yellow-coloured young oak-leaves and bits of blossomed blackthorn in the ragged hedges that divided the small pastures; and, for music, the chorus of all the feathered tribes in Mirkdale, the never-weary voice of the beck, the stealthy whisper of the trees one to another, and the plaintive flute-like tones of the wind, stealing from hollow to hollow, and from peak to peak, with the last farewells of winter.

Margaret lingered in the porch so long that at length Jacky came, rather impatiently, to summon her in to breakfast, which, for the first time that year, was laid in what was called the summer parlour at Wildwood Grange. It was a spacious but low ceiled room, with two wide windows almost to the ground, and light green stained walls covered with prints after Raffaele's cartoons—prints which had been Margaret's lesson-books long before she was induced to learn to read. It did not contain any great luxury of furniture—Sylvan Holt could not abide extravagance; there was an oval walnut-wood table polished like a mirror, a bureau of curious carved workmanship, a book-case filled with old books, several high straight-backed chairs that were never moved from their places, an ancient settee stationary beside the window nearest the fireplace, and two special chairs—one cumbrous, black leather-covered, and ungainly, the other, a low beehive chair—which migrated between the summer and winter parlours, just as did Sylvan Holt and his daughter. Margaret also had a basket of flowering plants which were her own peculiar care and property, and the only other ornamental articles in the room were some tall jars and vases of the grotesque dragon china, which had been bought in a lot with the other furniture, and a richly inlaid Indian work-box that she had received from Mrs. Joan Clervaux as a bribe to learn needlework—a bribe which had failed of its intent, as all bribes deserve to do.

As the arrangements of Margaret's days depended solely on her own pleasure they were never very complicated. After

breakfast she always first fed the tame birds that were accustomed to visit the window ; next she read her chapter in the Bible—a duty to which her father himself had trained her, on the principle that it is an excellent thing for a woman to be pious ; then she made belief at housekeeping with Jacky in the kitchen for a little while, and, if Sylvan Holt was at home, she afterwards read aloud to him for an hour out of a book of history. They always omitted this intellectual exercise if an eligible excuse offered, but if not they went through with it punctually, as a duty they owed to the mild remonstrances of Mrs. Joan Clervaux. On this particular morning both the housekeeping and the history were neglected, and as soon as the chapter was ended Margaret donned her straw hat and plaid, and started off with Oscar—both of them as eager as they could be for a ramble in the almost forgotten luxury of a sunshiny morning. They were aiming direct for the moor when Jacky saw them from the kitchen window, and elevating her shrill voice arrested their further progress.

“ I’ve gotten an arrand for you, Marg’ret, to keep you fra’ draggling your clean frock amang t’wet ling,” cried see, having a careful thought for the afternoon’s visit. “ Anty ha’n’t had leesure to go down to Beckford sin’ Sunday, an’ he’ll no’ ha’ time to-day ; will you go an’ ask Tibbie Ryder for t’ master’s letters ? ”

Margaret hesitated for a moment, looking ruefully at Oscar ; then saying, “ Very well, Jacky,” turned off in a contrary direction down the fields. The foot-path ran along under a hedgerow where the white May buds were just beginning to peep amongst the green, and which lay beyond a considerable tract of forest-land that had been thinned but never brought into cultivation, and where the low shrubs and gorse, that had since grown up very thickly, afforded a good cover for game. Margaret loitered by the way, gathering a posy of wild flowers—speedwell, forget-me-not, primrose, dog-violet, and wood-anemone—which had a peculiar and dainty delight for her, as being the first she had culled that year. Oscar ranged over the fields, meantime, in a state of most glorious excitement : he had espied a young leveret, and when only in Margaret’s company he considered himself free to give chase to whatever quarry appeared in view. His temptations became stronger still when on reaching Wildfoot—a lovely knoll where Blackbeck made a sudden curve—the path diverged into the wood

itself. His mistress led him by the ear part of the way, whether he would or no, but he slyly took advantage of a careless moment when she was looking up and trying, deftly enough, to imitate the whistling of a blackbird on a branch overhead, to break away from her and carry dismay into the bosoms of several promising families of young pheasants. It was through a narrow glade of nearly a quarter of a mile in length, between closely planted fir-trees, that the pathway ran, and here and there shone about their roots clusters of pale primroses as stars shine through a dark night. The mould was soft as a carpet, being composed of ages of fallen verdure, which gave out a pungent scent as the foot pressed it—a scent that always pervaded Margaret's after-dreams of home. This glade issued into Beckford Lane, nearly opposite Greatorex Mills, below which was Horsebrigg. Scarcely fifty yards beyond was Oakfield, and about half-a-mile further on was the village of Beckford itself, almost hidden in the scoop of a hill.

CHAPTER IV.

THE POSTMISTRESS AT BECKFORD.

THE Post-office at Beckford was kept by a little shrivelled old woman named Tibbie Ryder, who had the reputation of being a wise woman, cunning in foreseeing future events, in confounding the wicked devices of ill-disposed persons, in discovering lost or stolen articles, and in curing bewitched horses, cattle, or individuals. Some persons accused her of being herself the witch who first worked the malicious spells and then demanded money for taking them off those upon whom they had been laid. Nobody, it was said, had ever incurred Tibbie Ryder's animosity without paying for it very dearly. To be evil-wished by her was sure to be followed by family misfortunes, by destruction of property, and in extreme cases, by bodily disease of a lingering character, and even by death itself; lucky was it for Tibbie that the terrible days of fire and faggot were past, or she and her fine grey cat would assuredly have

made a lowe on Beckford-common, such as there was many a one lighted in England in the much lamented good old times!

The mischief she wrought as a witch was formidable enough in keeping alive ignorance and despicable fear, but Tibbie had yet other tools in her possession from which, in part, arose her evil reputation. She knew all the private skeletons and public scandals in Mirkdale, for her opportunities had been great and her industry untiring. Many was the wafer that had yielded to the warm, tender blandishments of her tea-kettle spout; many the seal that had betrayed its trust under the poignant torture of her red-hot needle. She knew, as well as did Sylvan Holt himself, the miserable ghastly history of his early life; she was cognizant of Mrs. Joan Clervaux's youthful romance; she was quite well aware of the petty envies, jealousies, hatreds, malices, and uncharitablenesses that animated the correspondence of some of the most demure and respectable people: and one or two of the very *best* folk in Mirkdale had pleaded guilty of debt and difficulties at the secret tribunal of this inexorably inquisitive old woman.

When Margaret appeared at her garden gate, Tibbie was engaged in the study of Sylvan Holt's London paper, the cover of which had conveniently come off in her hand. So profoundly was she absorbed in the details of a horrible murder that she did not hear the light foot approaching until a shadow fell across the floor and Margaret stood in the doorway asking: "are there any letters for our house, Tibbie?"

Tibbie started guiltily:

"Wha' is it?" said she, lifting her hand to her spectacles and pretending not to see; "Wha' is it? I suld know that voice. Eh! it's Margaret Holt! Letters, honey! yes, there's ane's been here sin' Monday: a letter fra' furren parts fra' t' look on it:" and skilfully holding the newspaper so that her gown skirt hid all but one treacherous corner that would stick out beyond, she tottered into the adjoining room which served as post-office, parlour, and bedroom, all in one, brought the document from a drawer in an old press and handed it to Margaret, who turned it over and examined it narrowly about the seal. It looked very suspicious: there was a trace of burning on the edge of the paper where it had been closed, and the impression was blurred, as if a finger had touched the heated wax.

"This letter has been opened, Tibbie," said Margaret decisively.

"I'll take my dying oath it's not!" asseverated the story-telling Tibbie; "why it's sealed wi' wax! wha'd open it, think ye?" Margaret and the postmistress had formerly had many a long *crack* together touching the traditional superstitions of Mirkdale, but lately a certain coolness had ensued between them on the score of Tibbie having opened a letter from Mrs. Joan Clervaux to her young friend when she was absent from Oakfield at Christmas, paying visits amongst her relations, and having disseminated absurd and exaggerated rumours in Beckford founded upon what she had learnt therein.

"If you look at it till Doomsday you'll make nought out; there's been no tampering wi' it sin' it came to my office," Tibbie added, softening unaccountably, as Margaret still continued to examine the seal.

"I hope not, my father will be sure to discover it if there has; and you know he threatened to report you the next time there was anything suspicious;" replied Margaret with unconvinced severity.

Tibbie evidently became anxious to change the subject.

"Wait till t' fust time comes, an' then talk o' t' next!" retorted she with an air of affronted innocence: "*My* conscienco is as clear as t' day." With this touching climax she retired into the post-office and closed the door; hastily folded the newspaper, slipped it into the cover and then called out to Margaret, who was progressing slowly down the garden-walk, that she had forgotten to give her the last week's paper. She brought it out with a quavering apology for the bad memory of a failing old woman which was intended to restore peace between them; but Margaret was not so easily propitiated; her young face was capable of expressing sternness and displeasure, and her lips remained closely sealed. Tibbie generally had an available fund of gossip on hand which she could introduce on an emergency, but at this moment her wit failed her: she trembled and was visibly confused; it is even possible that her naughty old tongue might have faltered into further strongly attested denials of her Eveish curiosity had not an opportune diversion taken place. This came in the person of a young lady mounted on a handsome bay horse and followed by a servant in livery. It was Miss Bell Rowley, eldest daughter of Sir Thomas Rowley of Bransby Park, a

girl between whom and the post-mistress there existed an avowed enmity; for she was so particular that her letters should be delivered to her scrupulously intact that she never received one from the old woman's hand without asking suspiciously, "Are you sure you have not opened it, Tibbie?" Tibbie always answered, "You'll never be content till you've got my life, Miss Bell," and occasionally she put a note of invitation or something equally unimportant, *underneath* her tea-kettle after she had read it instead of transmitting it to its destination out of pure revenge; so Bell had missed many a pleasant party through lack of knowing that she was asked to join it.

"Letters, Tibbie?" asked she laconically, and receiving as brief a negative shake of the head, she rode on without stopping.

"You'll know wha' that is?" said Tibbie sarcastically; "all t' world knows her! There an't a bolder-faced or bolder mannered lass i' all Mirkdale, be she gentle or be she simple, than yon Bell Rowley! She was safe to come riding this way as soon as she got word that Mrs. Joan Clervaux's nephew was down at Oakfield."

"Martin Carew! when did he arrive?" asked Margaret, forgetting in an instant all her vexation about the letter.

Tibbie thought, "I've got the measure of your foot, miss!" and then said; "He arrived last night. He's come for a leave-taking like, for he's received his orders to be off to the Indies, but he'll be here a fortnight somebody telt me. Mrs. Joan Clervaux 'll take his going sorely to heart, I doubt, for he's always been a good lad to her."

This was news to Margaret Holt, news of the pleasantest! Of course, she would have learnt it later in the day, but she was pleased to have heard it before going to Oakfield, and she began secretly to hope that her dear old friend Mrs. Joan would not be *at home* that day to Miss Bell Rowley, whose presence would utterly spoil what she knew was intended to be an afternoon of great enjoyment for her. Martin Carew and Margaret Holt were friends of long standing, and would have doubtless a thousand insignificant things to say to each other that were not for her great ears and critical eyes to hear and dissect.

As Margaret went up the fields homewards she kept out of the grass, thinking what a lucky thing it was that Jacky had sent her to Beckford instead of letting her trail about the wet

moor all the morning to spoil her clean fresh dress. Arriving at the Grange, she remembered the letter again, and calling Jacky into council exhibited the suspicious appearances to her. Jacky made a cross in the air before mentioning Tibbie's dreaded name, and then agreed that it had certainly been opened and reclosed. They laid it, seal upwards, on Sylvan Holt's desk, and they left it to await his return from Middlemoor in the evening.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. JOAN CLERVAUX.

THE Mrs. Joan Clervaux to whom frequent allusion has already been made in these pages, was an unmarried lady of good family and moderate fortune residing on her own property at Oakfield, whose chief work and pleasure in life might be said to consist in benefiting others. Her name was a proverb in Mirkdale for all that is excellent, just as was Sylvan Holt's for all that is churlish. The way in which they became acquainted was as follows.

Margaret had not passed through the common infantine disorders before coming to Wildwood, and soon after she was smitten with scarlet fever. Her father was almost beside himself, and poor Jacky, terrified at his insane rage and grief, made anything but a judicious nurse. The neighbourhood was not on terms of intimacy with the new owner of the Grange, who had come into Mirkdale a perfect stranger, therefore no kind, motherly woman came to offer service or advice until Mrs. Joan Clervaux, touched by what she heard of the child's danger and Sylvan Holt's extremity of sorrow, ventured to brave his notorious savagery, and presented herself at his door. She was admitted, and under her care, Margaret recovered. Gratitude would be a weak word to express what Sylvan Holt felt towards this excellent woman; it was, he said, as if she had restored his child to him from the brink of the grave, and the friendship thus begun continued without interruption; but up to this date Mrs. Joan Clervaux's was the only neighbourly foot that had crossed the threshold of Wildwood Grange.

The mistress of Oakfield was a gentlewoman of a type not common in these days. She had been born and bred in the dales and had never travelled far beyond them at any time of her life; her accent was marked by their provincialisms and her mind by their vigorous healthy tone. To strangers both might possibly have betrayed a tincture of harshness; but to those who knew and loved her, her words and sentiments were as a pleasant strengthening bitter in the mouth. Though nearly sixty years old, she was as alert and active as a young girl; she still walked many miles daily, still rode on horseback to make calls at a distance, still preserved her cheerful elasticity of spirits, and no little of the bloom and expression of her once great beauty. She was a tall, stately commanding woman in appearance, and all her surroundings and belongings testified to a natural and inborn refinement which had not been frittered into fastidiousness by over-cultivation. She was well-read in history, biography and travels, but her natural preference lay with books of romantic literature—either prose or poetry; and she could still take as vital an interest in the complications of a pretty love-story as any young maiden to whom the passion is only a name fraught with beautiful mystery and much temptation.

CHAPTER VI.

TAKING TEA AT OAKFIELD.

GOING to take tea with Mrs. Joan Clervaux meant, so far as Margaret Holt was concerned, arriving at Oakfield early in the afternoon, and, whatever the season, staying only to the edge of twilight, so that she might walk home alone. As soon, therefore, as she had eaten her mid-day dinner, and seen Oscar composed for his siesta in front of the kitchen fire, she set off on her visit. Two miles of picturesquely varied scenery lay between Oakfield and the Grange; but instead of taking the same route as in the morning, which was, indeed, the shorter, she went by the fields that lay along Blackbeck, whose waters were still foaming in flood over the great mossy stones that made a ford in summer. A turbulent stream Blackbeck was at

all seasons of the year, but now it glanced so bonnily under the overhanging bushes, flinging up tiny clouds of spray as it bounded from fall to fall, that Margaret almost longed to kilt her petticoats to the knee and wade through it, as she had often done when a little girl. But instead she followed its windings past Greatorex Mills and down to Horsebrigg, and crossing there found herself at Oakfield just about the time that Mrs. Joan Clervaux was observing to her nephew that "that wild little gipsy, Margaret Holt," would soon be there. They were sitting in the drawing-room together when they heard the gate clash, and Martin immediately opened the glass door upon the lawn, and went down the avenue to meet her.

"Aunt Joan, here is Margaret pretending not to know me!" cried he, as he came back.

Margaret shook hands with her old friend, and then glanced round at him again. "I begin to see you now," said she archly; "at first sight you were quite strange;" and her forefinger traced a curved line along her upper lip.

Martin laughed: "When you were a little maiden no higher than this, Margaret," said he, lifting his hand to a level with Mrs. Joan's work-table, "you used to declare that you would be courted by none but a bearded knight, and that if he were only brave enough you should marry him and follow him round the world, on a packsaddle!"

"Oh! I have changed my mind since then!" retorted she, and sitting down on a couch she loosed the strings of her hat and uncovered her hair, which the wind had blown about her face and neck in a very pretty disorder.

Martin Carew ventured to touch it with his profane hand, and to observe that his Aunt Joan had not instilled orthodox principles of hair-dressing into her mind yet: and a pair of scissors lying conveniently within reach, at the sight of them he fell into temptation, and secretly snipped off one small glossy tress. Margaret was quite unconscious of the theft, but Mrs. Joan saw it, and said very gently, "Don't be foolish, children," and then she sent Margaret up stairs to take off her plaid and smooth those provoking curls.

"Aunt Joan, if ever I marry a wife it shall be Margaret Holt!" said her nephew decisively, as soon as the sound of the retreating footsteps ceased: he looked very eager, very much in earnest too.

"That is just like you, Martin! always rash, obstinate, and

impetuous! You make up your mind in a hurry, and nothing can turn you. Supposing Margaret does not choose *you*—and I am sure the child has not a serious thought in her head—what then?”

“Well, if she does not, I’ll live and die a bachelor for her sake!”

“I don’t believe it, Martin Carew! you are only a boy—yes, I know what you mean to insinuate,” added she, as her nephew caressed the shady moustache which had caused Margaret’s shyness when they met; “you are a soldier, and are going to carve out a fortune with your sword, and do mighty grand things, I dare say;—but this is a tangible certainty: you are a lieutenant with a lieutenant’s pay, and nothing besides; you are certainly to remain *five*, and it may even be *ten* years in India——”

Margaret re-appeared, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux was silent. “Miss Bell Rowley is coming over Horsebrigg,” announced she; “I saw her from the window on the stairs.”

“Coming already!” said Mrs. Joan; “she has been to the Rectory to luncheon, and she sent word that in returning home she should stay and have an early tea with me. You did not count on so much fine company did you, gipsy?”

Margaret laughed at her dismay being detected, and Martin Carew hastily suggested that they two should retreat to the greenhouse, where there were some beautiful flowers out, and only waiting to be admired, he said.

“You will do nothing of the kind at present; you will stay and help me to entertain Bell Rowley, both of you,” interposed Mrs. Joan; and before any further remonstrance or excuse could be attempted, the unwelcome visitor presented herself at the glass door.

She was a middle-sized, thick-set girl, with large limbs and extremities; a broad, highly coloured face, which some persons styled handsome and others coarse; a voice full of loud self-assertion; and a forward pretentious manner. By dint of a noisy freedom of tone she had acquired a reputation for great warmth of heart, which enabled her to be one of the most successfully selfish persons that ever breathed; and though ingrained with some of the most disagreeable qualities, she had been so long provided with scapegoats for all her faults by an easy, injudicious mother, that she believed herself to have been all original perfection, just slightly warped by the

wicked neglects and seductions of nurses, teachers, and companions.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux, charitable as she was to the world in general, had an extreme distaste for Miss Bell Rowley, and perhaps that young lady's flippant familiarity and ostentatious pride had never shown themselves to her in stronger colours than they did now in contrast with Margaret Holt's frank simplicity. The two girls were well known to each other by sight, but they had never before met to be introduced, and Bell Rowley, after acknowledging Margaret's presence with a curt, patronizing nod, whispered confidentially to Mrs. Joan—

"The Holts—are they *good* people? I thought he was only a sort of farmer."

Mrs. Joan Clervaux had a quietly lofty way with her when she wished to rebuke impertinence, against which even Miss Bell Rowley's audacity could not stand; and at the expressive glance she received, she immediately desisted from her inquiries about Margaret, and assailed Martin Carew with the full batteries of her fascination and eloquence. Martin had a spice of wicked drollery in his composition, which incited him to draw out her salient characteristics of boasting and self-adulation; he listened with an air of the most earnest gravity to her marvellous feats of prowess in the hunting field, and at the recital of one awful leap across Blackbeck, near Hellgap, which she asserted had never before been accomplished either by man or fiend, he responded in so deeply impressed a tone that Margaret could not forbear smiling—

"You must surely have ridden Pegasus!"

"Oh no, we have not a horse called that: it was only Doctor Slops," replied Bell, mythologically unconscious of her blunder, and then turning to Margaret she said—"The last time we hunted the stag—in March it was—you were out with your father: he rode a very handsome black horse—do you think he wants to sell it? I took quite a liking to it."

"No, I am sure he does not: Faustus is his own favourite," replied Margaret laconically.

"Indeed! We fancied that perhaps he wished to show it off in the field. What a pity you were not out with us that day, Mr. Carew, we had such a rare run. The stag was turned down at Burniston Hang, and made directly for Blackbeck; it crossed just below Greenfell, and then took the open fields towards Allonby, and so over into Ferndikes, where it was

caught. I should have been in with the first, but my mare—I don't know what ailed her—fell behind early. You were pretty well mounted, Miss Holt."

"What did you ride, Margaret?" Mrs. Joan Clervaux inquired.
"Crosspatch."

"She is a beautiful creature; why did you give her that ugly name?"

"Because she is rather vicious, and will not let anybody mount her but myself."

"I would both mount her and tame her too," cried Bell with scornful decision; "I never yet saw the horse that I could not manage: I must have been born for a jockey! I always tell papa that I have but one ambition in life, and that is, to ride and win a steeple-chase."

She looked round for applause, but Mrs. Joan Clervaux was diligent at her lamb's-wool socks, Margaret was gazing meditatively at the waving laburnums in the garden, and Martin Carew was mentally quoting certain lines from Hudibras that are far more forcible than polite. After receiving a few more harmless shots from Bell's long-bow he opened the glass door; and, in defiance of a monitory glance from his aunt, he whispered to Margaret to come out into the garden, which she immediately did; and the boastful Amazon, much to her annoyance, was left alone with Mrs. Joan Clervaux.

"Really that Margaret Holt would be a well-looking creature if she did not wear her hair so like a boy's! What a straight, finely poised figure she has!" remarked Bell, watching the recusants as they crossed the lawn. "So you patronize her, Mrs. Joan?"

"She is my very dear young friend: I love Margaret Holt as if she were my own flesh and blood, Bell Rowley!"

"I had no idea of it! is she odd at all?"

Mrs. Joan did not answer, and so Bell judged it expedient to speak of something else. But her next choice of subject was not more fortunate; or, rather, her manner of treating it jarred the feelings of her auditors.

"I hear that Mr. Carew is going out to India with his regiment next month: why does he not exchange and stay at home?" asked she.

"Martin Carew knows better than to shirk his duty, I hope. He is a brave, modest lad; and I, for one, have no desire to see him turn his sword into a bodkin."

"Oh, Mrs. Joan, *modest!* Are not modest men myths? But joking apart—how is he to get forward? We all know he is too poor to purchase his steps; and without money or influential patronage there is small chance of promotion, though I suppose it is more rapid out there than here. But then the risks—he might die of the climate, or perhaps be killed!"

"Well, Bell Rowley, that would be only the fortune of war!" replied Mrs. Joan, breathing a little faster as she caught a glimpse of her nephew walking to and fro with Margaret. "Only the fortune of war! Not a word to chill him shall he hear from me. He is an enthusiast in his profession, and as he did not enter it to *play* at soldiering, he will earn some honours before he is grey."

"Ten years is the usual time they stay out, is it not? I don't know how you can bear to part with him for so long; it seems almost as if you did not care for him. I do wonder you let him go! you may perhaps never see him again!"

"Bell Rowley, do you think we have nothing in this world to do but to consult our own selfish feelings?" said Mrs. Joan with severity, though her lip quivered irrepressibly. "If I never do see my boy again—which at my age is too probable—what then? Am I to blight that promising young life for the sake of keeping him tied to my elbow chair?"

"If you take that exalted view of it, I suppose it would seem hard; but most of the men I know—Ross, and Outram, and ——"

"Not a word against them, Bell! I know them too:—wild, hare-brained, thoughtless lads they seem, full of fun and frolic; so is Martin Carew: he is as playful as a child sometimes, and as gentle as the gentlest woman—but they are one and all brave men and brave soldiers, and I am sure they love their country and their honour better far than shameful ease!"

Bell Rowley raised her eyebrows, and declared she had never looked on the service in any other light than that of the most idle and aristocratic of the professions resorted to by gentlemen; she imagined that Mr. Carew would be only too glad to do garrison duty in some pleasant country town where the society was good, in preference to being grilled alive, or very likely shot, in that dreadful India, where, according to the newspapers, fighting was for ever going on.

"Then you have totally misunderstood his character," said Mrs. Joan; "Martin Carew is a better soldier than carpet knight."

"I'm sure I shall always regard him in future as a most chivalrous person!" rejoined Bell pertly; "but to my weak mind it does look excessively Quixotic and high-flown to prefer active service to those pretty reviews and mock fights."

Mrs. Joan Clervaux did not vouchsafe any answer to this proposition: she knitted assiduously, and reflected that poor Bell had never felt the stirring influence of noble or lofty thoughts, and so could not be expected to give them utterance: or even to comprehend them where she saw how by their power others were moved. Bell's soul was essentially of the earth, earthy, and would never rise above the animal wants and indulgences of a life of selfish pleasure; Mrs. Joan had tried often before to get at some finer vein in what seemed all clay, but never with success, and now she was so excited by the fears that Bell's heartless suggestions had called up, as to be incapable of reasoning with her, or indeed of speaking at all for several minutes. At last, by way of a break in what was becoming a painful silence, she proposed to her visitor that they should adjourn to the greenhouse, and look at some new plants that had recently been sent from Walham Castle. Bell always professed to hate and despise innocent amusements, but she now felt uncomfortably that she had hurt and offended one whom to abuse—as her amiable custom was with her acquaintance—could only redound to her own disadvantage, and therefore she strove to efface the bad impression she had made by going into raptures over Mrs. Joan's favourite floricultural beauties. At any other moment, perhaps, she would have perversely declared that she hardly knew a cabbage from a cabbage rose, have called the nettle a graceful plant, vowed she liked the smell of wild garlic or turnips better than lilies, and have otherwise manifested her contradictory temper. But Mrs. Joan's quiet and lofty gravity overawed her into respectful behaviour for a brief season.

While they were in the greenhouse, Martin Carew and Margaret Holt were pacing about the shrubbery walks, exchanging experiences during the interval since their last meeting about six months before. Martin had lost his parents (who had married very early and imprudently) whilst but a child, and ever since Oakfield had been home to him; it was, indeed, the only home he had ever known, and that was how he and Margaret had become such fast friends. They had been like brother and sister together while they were children; and later on, when he

was sent to a military training college for his education, and only came to Oakfield for his holidays, they were still constant companions. Margaret was made the confidant of all Martin's chivalric aspirations from his boyhood to the present hour, and the lapse of time which had lifted them to early manhood and womanhood seemed to have caused no perceptible change in the nature of their friendship.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux looked out at them through a screen of flowers, and saw Margaret laughing—a most musical laugh hers was too—with unrestrained girlish glee, probably at some ludicrous story Martin was telling her of his Tipperary quarters, and thought in her own mind that however deeply pledged were *his* affections, *she* at least was fancy-free. Bell Rowley, assiduously following the direction of Mrs. Joan's eye in the hope of meeting with an opportunity to throw in some conciliatory remark, also noticed the unreserved manner of each to the other and said—

“One might almost take those two for cousins, Mrs. Joan; it may perhaps seem an absurd remark to make, but, allowing for difference of sex, they are extremely alike. Don't you think so?”

“It never struck me before, but I do see that air of resemblance which persons seem to acquire by long liking and association,” replied Mrs. Joan with awakened interest: “but it is more in manner than feature. Martin never was a pretty boy, but he has a fine manly face, and his height is noble; all our family are tall. As for Margaret Holt, I never saw a young girl with greater promise of beauty, and of beauty which will last too:—but she is scarcely formed yet.”

“What a sad pity it is she has been so strangely brought up! I feel quite sorry for her, poor thing,” said Bell demurely.

“Your pity is wasted, then, on one of the best and noblest and most intelligent of creatures!” returned Mrs. Joan, who always warmly defended her favourite to others, though she lectured her herself. “Margaret Holt stands in need of nobody's commiseration.”

“Perhaps not, though a careful education is generally considered an advantage. Yet I dare say if she had met with no better teachers than I did, it is quite as well that she escaped without. What incapables mine were! mamma always says that I lost far more than I gained by them.”

“It was entirely your own fault if you did, Bell: you were

a most conceited and headstrong child;" said Mrs. Joan, who was the only individual in the world from whom Bell could bear to hear a disagreeable truth without flying into a rage.

"Oh! I daresay I was troublesome!" replied she in a vaunting tone: "but those two Doves were such fools: I could turn either of them round my little finger! I had only to fling myself down on the floor, and scream loud enough and long enough, and they let me do whatever I wanted, for fear I should make myself ill. Then as for Miss Sharpe, though she did get through two awful years with me she was worn down to an anatomical study before she left: mamma always said she never took any interest in me, or tried to form my character at all; but that was a slight mistake of mamma's, for she was at me for all evers! I never hated anybody half so much. But I did not dare to be as bad with her as the others, for she was so satirical, and never minded speaking out plain, to mamma or papa either, just what she thought of any of us: not a bit like most governesses, who, between parents and pupils, hardly dare call their souls their own."

"Oh! Bell, Bell! I have heard of your school-room battles and triumphs until I am sick at the sound of them! You ought to blush to speak of them, instead of glorying in them as you do. You are far more to be pitied than Margaret Holt."

Bell laughed:

"I know you think me a wild girl, but I get on very well, notwithstanding," said she; "I have always plenty of partners at the balls and men in the hunting-field, and that is all I care for. I was never meant for a pattern of propriety."

"Do you behave better to your mother than you did, Bell? I used to see you very selfish and tyrannical at home;" said Mrs. Joan.

"It is her own fault! she ought to have given me some good whippings when I was a child, and then I should have mended my ways."

"And how do you go on with your maid, poor Lucy? I understand from her aunt that she wishes to leave you."

"You will be shocked, I know, but sometimes I declare I wish she were a serf, and I a Russian lady, that I might beat her insolence and stupidity out of her! Only yesterday she dared to tell me to my face that flesh and blood could not stand my tongue or my temper! Very pretty that from a Sunday school scholar to her mistress."

"I am not surprised, Bell, and I hope you mean to profit by her rebuke to correct and restrain both," said Mrs. Joan, drily.

Bell fumed in secret over this novel view of her grievance, but judged it expedient to let the subject drop.

By and by tea was ready in the drawing-room; but Martin Carew and Margaret had betaken themselves to the beckside, and were some time before they returned. When they did come in, at last, it was with a proposal for a day's excursion to Deepgyll Falls, while the hill streams were still in flood and the cool May weather continued fine.

"Sit down and make tea for us, Gipsy, and we will talk of that presently," said Mrs. Joan, who saw Bell Rowley (figuratively) prick up her ears at the mention of a riding party; and with whom, for private reasons of her own, she wished her young friend to associate as little as possible.

Margaret took her place before the tray, as had been her custom when she visited Oakfield ever since she was tall enough to handle the teapot; and Martin brought the music-stool beside her for himself, that he might help her with the urn.

Bell Rowley looked on in great amazement, and whispered, "You seem quite like a daughter of the house;" but Margaret either did not hear or did not understand, for she took no notice of the remark which was intended to discompose her.

Every trivial incident of the meal—all Martin's half-teasing assiduities to his favourite—were noted and conned over by Bell, who began at length, in spite of her thick-skinned vanity, to experience a vague sensation of uneasiness at being an evidently discordant element in the party. A victim to all the mean tortures of jealousy, she never could endure with graceful equanimity that any person should outshine her, or absorb more attention than herself, whatever the company. Many were her manœuvres to draw Martin from his allegiance, but failing all, she tried to comfort herself by enumerating mentally such of Margaret's social disadvantages as were within her ken. First, the equivocal position that Wildwood held in popular estimation; then Sylvan Holt's barbarism and seclusion; next, Margaret's isolation from society, her lack of proper education, and last, though perhaps not least, the irregular ideas she indulged in with regard to dress. This charitable spiritual exercise was not altogether cheering, as Bell's gloomy countenance betrayed, and at length, finding it

impossible to make herself the centre of attraction, she subsided into a sullen silence, pouting her heavy lips, contracting her thick brows, and feigning a total abstraction from what was passing.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux was well acquainted with all these signs of temper; for Bell wore them at home sometimes during several days together: when woe betide the luckless servant or younger child that crossed her humour! But Martin and Margaret, who knew her much less intimately, were sorely puzzled to understand what was making her face look as black and lowering as Greyscaur with a thunderstorm gathering over it. For some time they left her all the more to her own cogitation; but, at length, mindful of the graces of hospitality, Martin asked her a question which started her afresh on the tack of her equestrian achievements. She bloomed out again all noise and exuberance, and so continued until her horse was brought round to the door for her to return home. Martin went out, and after assisting her to mount, achieved his peace completely by a promise to ride over to luncheon at Bransby Park the next day; but Bell marked her displeasure at Margaret by overlooking her altogether when she shook hands with the others, and just nodding her a cavalier good evening as she turned and rode off.

CHAPTER VII.

MARGARET HOLT AND MARTIN CAREW.

It was now almost dusk, the sun had been set some time; so Mrs. Joan Clervaux kissed her favourite and bade her put on her hat and plaid:

"Martin can walk with you to Wildfoot;" said she; "but neither of you loiter by the way, or it will be dark before you can reach home: next week you shall go to Deepgyll Falls." And then the old lady dismissed them, reminding Margaret that if her father had returned from Middlemoor he would most probably come down the fields to meet her: so they set out at once.

"This is pleasant, Margaret. I am glad you are not a talking girl," said Martin, as they went up Beckford lane.

"What for? because you so dearly love to talk yourself?" asked Margaret mischievously.

"No; but because my ears ache with Bell Rowley's magpie chatter."

"Don't be censorious, Martin: she is a very popular character."

"She does not harmonize with this time of night, like one I know: she is not quiet and cool and balmy. Margaret, I shall often remember this bonnie Mirkdale when I am in India. If you should ever hear anything sighing beside you in the twilight, it will be my disembodied spirit."

"I hope not, Martin! I shall be rejoiced to welcome you home in the flesh, but if you come as a ghost I will have nothing at all to say to you."

"Don't be hard, Margaret! I wish you would pay me angel visits out there."

"Why, Martin, you'd be horribly afraid if I did. You are talking nothing but nonsense to-night."

"What places do you haunt most? I want to fancy your incomings and out-goings, and to be able to raise up pictures of you before my mind's eye whenever I choose."

"Mrs. Joan says I must begin seriously to read and improve myself, and Jacky bids me learn to mend stockings; so imagine me growing dull over Rollin, and pricking my fingers cruelly with long darning-needles."

"No! I would rather have visions of you in this Swiss hat ranging the moor with Oscar, as we used to do when I came home for my holidays a year or two ago; or else sitting on the old settee by the window of that quaint summer parlour, dreaming and wishing for me. By the by, Margaret, would your father be glad to see me if I came up to the Grange?"

"He is never glad to see anybody, Martin."

Martin Carew, with loverlike selfishness, internally blessed Sylvan Holt for the unsociable disposition that kept people in general from Margaret's presence, but he would have approved a dispensation in his own favour extremely; and while conjecturing what made the owner of Wildwood so recluse, he could not help wondering how that fragrant blossom, which he hoped some day to appropriate to himself, had ever sprung from so rugged and ungainly a root: but aware of Margaret's

boundless attachment to her father, he immediately turned the conversation, and said,

"When I am gone, my Aunt will miss me, Margaret; you must go often to cheer her, for I believe she loves you better than anybody else: you suit her, and she suits you. Am I right?"

"Yes, Martin, and then I shall hear news of you sometimes; she always lets me read your letters. What a quantity of strange things you will have to tell us! Mind you write long, long letters, and often, *often*."

"I promise faithfully! And you really will be interested to hear what I am doing, and how I get on?"

"Of course I shall! I expect you will come home to us a general, or a colonel at the least! I know you will be a great man some day, Martin; and we shall be so proud of you! Mrs. Joan and I have talked about it often."

"Oh, Margaret! it will be your dear, bonnie face that will encourage me to win my laurels, if anything does! I shall always think that one kind soul is giving me its prayers and good wishes. But ten years, even five years, is a long time!"

"No, Martin, no! you will be seeing new places, and doing new duties: fighting perhaps; it makes me shudder to think of *that*! and we shall be talking over your last letter or expecting your next: then we shall read all the Indian intelligence in the newspapers. Oh, the time will pass! and when you come back, there'll be Wildwood and Oakfield and Mrs. Joan and me looking not a day older than we did when you went away! Beckford Church bells shall be rung merrily that day, Martin, if I ring them myself!"

"But I shall be an old fellow with grizzled hair and moustache; you won't know me, Margaret!"

"Certainly not! And you will have a yellow face and a bad temper, and what more horrid? Why, Martin, you will only be thirty!"

"Your arithmetic has not been quite neglected, I see. Then you won't forget me in ten years? you should give me some gage."

"You are in a melancholy mood: I shall not talk to you any more to-night; besides, here we are at Wildfoot. Say good-bye; and don't tell Bell Rowley to-morrow when we are going to Deepgyll, or she will want to go too."

"I might as well walk a little further with you ; it is dark by the woodside. Who are these coming down, Margaret ?"

"My father and Oscar : there, you are not to come over the stile:" and drawing her hand from his, she ran swiftly up the steep path towards them. Martin waited a moment to see her join Sylvan Holt, and then turned back to Oakfield, musing doubtfully on Margaret's frank expressions of affection, and his Aunt Joan's declaration "that the child had not one serious thought in her head."

CHAPTER VIII.

SYLVAN HOLT'S MYSTERY.

SYLVAN HOLT met his daughter with hand outstretched, as she came running up to him, and immediately asked who had been her companion. Her reply that it was Martin Carew, Mrs. Joan Clervaux's nephew, appeared to satisfy him ; but it elicited no further interrogatory or remark, and they went silently homewards—Margaret hanging on her father's arm, for she was tired ; having, indeed, been on foot nearly the whole day.

There was a lighted lamp on the parlour table when they entered, as it was now dark in the house, but the curtains were undrawn and both the windows wide open. It was one of Sylvan Holt's peculiar and fantastic whims that never in any season or any weather would he permit either day or night to be shut out ; so that while the moonlight, lamplight or firelight were struggling together on the walls, the ceiling and the floor, belated travellers low down in the valley recognised the old Grange at Wildwood by two dimly shining windows, within which the master and his daughter sat, sometimes reading or talking together, but much more frequently quite silent. Martin Carew, as he went along by the wan night-waters of the beck, paused often to look up at them, and to try, with the fanciful enthusiasm of a young lover, if he could distinguish Margaret's shadow moving in the room : but their yellow glow through the thickening mists was unbroken, and though not much given to poetical imagery, he said to himself that it was like a halo

shining about her presence; then laughed at the foolish conceit, and began to whistle away his sombre thoughts.

Sylvan Holt was a tall, powerfully built, middle-aged man, clad in dark grey frieze, such as was the habitual wear of the Mirkdale farmers at this period. His countenance was that of a profoundly melancholy and suffering person; his lips were curved downwards, his strong brows raised stormily; and deep, waved, transversal lines marked his forehead; his hair was dark, thick and harsh, only slightly streaked with grey; his whole aspect that of a man who at some past epoch of his life had been trailed through a slough of misery, shame, and perchance crime, and to whose flesh the poisoned stains had clung, eating into and corroding his very soul. Passions quick and strong in their vitality, whether for good or ill, could alone have fitly animated his iron frame; nor were there any signs of natural failure or decay about him yet. He was like a mighty ship suddenly rent by a terrific explosion, or half-consumed by a fierce conflagration, but of which enough still remains to witness that it was a grand and goodly vessel once upon a time. Margaret's features were a soft copy of his; finely and daintily modelled it is true, but of that type which might petrify into a like sad severity, if her problem of life should prove hard to solve.

When she had been a few minutes in the room, she went to one of the windows and looked down the valley, through the deepening twilight, letting her thoughts follow Martin Carew on his homeward walk, not with any of the soft, tender pulsations of awakening love, but with the quiet yet deep sisterly interest that it was natural she should feel in one whom she had known so long and so intimately. While she was still standing there, silent and abstracted, her father approached the bureau and perceived lying on the desk the letter which she had brought up from the post in the morning. He took it carelessly, and carried it to the light to read; but as his eye scanned the few brief lines of which it consisted, the whole man was changed; and when he came to the last words, he crushed it in his hand, and staggered blindly to his chair. As he dropped into it, turning quite away from the light, he groaned like a man in acute bodily pain; and Margaret, who was about to go to her room to put off her hat and plaid, immediately looked round, startled and alarmed.

There was for a moment an awful expression on his face: it

was as if a corpse had become sentient, and were stirred out of its stony calm by a sudden spasm, an acute throe of living, breathing anguish. The veins of his forehead swelled into purple cords, and a convulsive quiver ran through every morsel of flesh upon his bones. Some terrible soul-ordeal, burning and poignant, was passed through in that instant such as not many of mortal organization can endure and live.

"Father, what ails you? I am sure you are ill. Oh, what has happened?" questioned Margaret, terrified at his strange look.

"Hush, child; let me alone!"

He leant his face down upon his hands and was silent, while she stole to the door and fastened it, lest Jacky should come in by chance, and then turned and watched him mutely from a distance. She could not long bear thus the sight of his struggle, and running suddenly to him she flung her arms round his neck crying—

"Speak to me, father! tell me why you are suffering?" and kissed him repeatedly.

He let her hang there for a few seconds till she felt, like an electric current through every nerve, the great sobs of pain that shook his bulk; and on her little hands, that half-unconsciously stroked and caressed his, fell tears drawn up, each one with a distinct throb of agony, from that secret source of wretchedness which had flooded and drowned his better life, even as those fatal Eastern inundations waste in one night the bountiful districts that are the hope and sustenance of a people.

This could not last long, or it must have killed him; he lifted himself up with a groan and took his daughter in his arms.

"It is a frosty night, Margaret, you shiver; I think I shiver too. Why don't you stir up the fire?" said he, looking at her vaguely.

"There is no fire, father: Jacky has filled the grate with green branches. Don't you see that we have changed from the winter to the summer parlour?"

"Yes, I noticed it when I came home, but it is very cold." He shook as a slight, delicate child might shake in a frozen north-east wind, but still encircling Margaret with his arm, he drew her to the open window. There was a newly risen moon, and the arch of heaven was regal with stars; but gusts broke

heavily out of Wildwood from time to time, like blind Sampsons bursting their bonds, and then rushed over to the moor, bowing the tree tops in front of the Grange as if forcing them to do homage to the night, throned and crowned in the purple sky. Margaret put forth her hand, and would have drawn down the sash, but her father stopped her.

"I cannot get breath, there is a dreadful weight somewhere;" said he hoarsely. "What is that, Margaret, wavering white against the woodside? It is gone—no. Look! it is like the flutter of a woman's dress."

"That, father! It is only the little poplar tree whose leaves the wind turns on the silver side. How your hands burn!"

She lifted one of them, and held it against her cool cheek for a moment, then lightly touched it with her lips, then pressed it against her bosom.

"What can I do for you?" said she, as tenderly as one might speak to a sick child; "you are troubled and overtired and want rest. Will you lie down and let me stay by you?"

He broke suddenly, almost roughly, away from her, and began to pace the room, giving loose to a turbulence of passionate gesture.

"Oh! hound, devil!" cried he, striking out his clenched hand savagely against the air as if he were assaulting a visible antagonist. "If he had had a thousand lives I would have killed him."

Margaret ventured to seize that fierce hand, and imprison it within her own.

"Be still, dear father, you terrify me! You do not know what you are saying:" whispered she soothingly.

"He is burning in hell for it, burning in hell now!" hissed he between his closed teeth, while his eyes glittered with insane triumph.

Margaret feigned not to hear his strange exclamation, and continued fearlessly—

"Father, you did not forget me to-night: I saw you coming to meet me as soon as I got to Wildfoot. Did you remember it was my birthday?"

He stared at her for a minute or two in a bewildered way, as if striving to recover himself from an agitating dream, and pressing his hand to his forehead, said confusedly—

"Yes, I remembered it. I bought you a little silver arrow

at Middlemoor to fasten your ribbon ; here it is : ” and he gave her the trinket from his pocket in a box.

Margaret took it out, admired it, and thanked him ; then she fastened it in the front of her dress, forced him to look, and bade him say if it was not pretty there. Often before she had seen him passionately excited or weighed down by a deadly depression, but as often her affection had been powerful enough to exorcise the evil spirit. Now, however, all her little wiles and caresses failed to dissipate the darkness of his dark hour ; though she strove, by every winning art her love could devise, to draw his thoughts to herself, and keep them from wandering back to the contemplation of his own wrongs. She spoke of Martin Carew’s departure to India, and of all she had seen and done down at Oakfield that day : matters which would have interested him at another time because they interested her, but which now fell vacantly on his ear. When the subject of her visit was at last exhausted, she was obliged to think of something else to say.

“ What shall we do to-morrow, father ? ” she began to ask ; “ you have not been out fishing this spring—shall we go ? ”

He paid no heed to the question—perhaps, did not even hear it—for he returned wearily to his chair, and sank back into the grim abstraction of his ordinary mood. Margaret sat down at his feet and rested her head against his knee ; and presently his fingers crept in amongst her curls, tangling them as they always did when she assumed this favourite childish attitude. She stayed there some time, glad to see him regain his habitual calm, yet full of anxiety to learn what cause had stirred him so terribly, and not daring to ask, lest she should renew the torture. Oscar had stretched himself along the rug, and lay slumbering wakefully, with one ear laid forward to listen for Jacky’s ponderous step mounting to bed, which was his signal for taking possession of the warm kitchen hearth. Soon after the house clock struck ten this signal was heard, and the dog immediately stalked to the door, which Margaret was obliged to rise and open for him. The slight noise disturbed her father’s reverie : he asked if she were going to bed, and was it late ?

“ No, I want to keep you company ; ” replied she cheerfully ; “ it was only Oscar, who was growing impatient of the cold. I will shut the windows now, father, for since dark quite a storm of wind has come on ; I hope the rain will keep away.”

"You look white and scared, Maggie," said her father, as she came and knelt down beside him, and turned her face to his to be kissed; "you had better go to bed; you cannot help me with what I have to do."

"But what have you to do to-night, father?" interrupted she; "don't think any more now, let every thing rest."

"Let every thing rest!" repeated he in a raised voice: "Oh, Maggie, there are some things that *cannot, will* not rest—that *murder* rest!" His passion seemed verging again to uncontrollable frenzy, and Margaret clung to him trembling and almost weeping; the sight of her tears gave him a shock that for the moment restored his self-command, and drawing her to his breast he said, with inexpressible pathos and tenderness: "My love, my pet! it is needless and cruel to grieve *thee*. But there has come at last the end of my great affliction, and I think it has almost turned my brain—but *you* are not frightened of me, Margaret? I would not hurt a hair of your head."

"Oh, father, I'm sure of that; but leave all trouble for to-night, and go to bed—will you, dearest? You are not fit to do any work at all, or I would stay and help you."

"You could not help me, Maggie, so go and sleep for both. Some day you must know what all this means."

Margaret shuddered with a sort of premonitory dread, but she tried to dissemble it as her father rose and went back to the window, which he reopened. For several minutes he stood gazing out into the moonlight, and then said quickly—

"Maggie, if you believed in ghosts, would you not say that the writhing and swaying of that young poplar tree, as the wind changes its leaves, was a white figure beckoning to us?"

"Many people have seen ghosts in less likely things," replied she, laughing softly, for she thought he was jesting. But he checked her and said—

"Don't laugh, Maggie! it sounds profane to laugh beside a grave, and such a grave!" Then he went on, in a tone of biting sarcasm, as if he had regained his grip of the broken strain of his habitual thoughts. "Oh, child, child! what do you know of this bitter world! All plausible and fair-seeming, yet in truth more hideous than the valley of dead bones! For misery it is only hell's antechamber." Margaret tried to lay her hand on his blasphemous lips, but he put it aside. "You are innocent, you are pure, but not more innocent and pure than *she* was once. Get to bed, little one; get to bed! and

pray God to keep you safe from temptation!" and while she was entreating, "Let me stay with you, dear father, do let me stay with you!" he led her gently to the door, put her out, and turned the key upon himself.

Margaret waited and listened for a minute or two, then retired slowly to her chamber oppressed with heavy disquietude. She pondered over the mystery of her father's words until she was almost dazed by trying to eke out therefrom a history. "The end of his great affliction," the savage threat, the burning tears, the corpse-like agony she had witnessed, all seemed to point to some dark and tragical passage in his former history; but what? At last flashed into her mind the recollection of the letter she had brought up from the Beckford post that morning, the letter from "furren parts," as Tibbie Ryder had told her; that, though strange, like all the rest, was still a clue; for, no doubt, it had brought the tidings which had caused such poignant grief, rending asunder the veil that shrouded the awful sepulchre of the past.

It was long before she slept. She could hear her father moving in the parlour below; sometimes there was an interval of silence: then what sounded like a heavy groan; and once, Oscar, in the kitchen, emitted a short angry bark, followed by a prolonged and dreary howl which made the blood run cold in her veins; for the Mirkdale superstition is that when the housedog howls thus, Death is coming with stealthy swiftness up to that homestead. The moonlight shone full into the room, making grotesque shadows out of wardrobes, chairs, and curtains upon the dark walls, and the wind clamoured boisterously at the lattices, as if it had a tale to tell that would not brook delay. There was a huge silver fir before one window that glimmered like a dark robed spectre, and staggered and swayed and bent forwards, as if struggling to come into the maiden presence that haunted the chamber, while it was ever held back by the strong and jealous arms of the storm, which was effectually barred out. Then the little gusts shrilled down the chimney, through the keyhole, and from under closed doors; and a vague empty moaning wailed to and fro the passages and long disused upper stories of the Grange, as if a chorus of dead sighs all blended into one, had revisited the place where they were born out of suffering hearts. Margaret's imagination ran wild sometimes after the ludicrously terrible superstitions with which Jacky had peopled it; but now there was present before

her mind the solemn reality of what she had seen her father endure, and this kept back the host of spiritual terrors that had often assailed her childhood in that great silent room by night. She listened intently to every noise in the house, rousing herself up again and again, when almost conquered by weariness; the last sound she distinguished was the opening and shutting of the drawers in the heavy old bureau; then sleep overcame her unawares, and she awoke no more until the morning sun shone broad and bold into her chamber.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD WOUNDS.

JACKY, the Grange servant, was a woman of stubborn Yorkshire build; hard-featured, rough-skinned, strong-limbed and cross-grained, but faithful as a dog to her master, and as tenderly attached to Margaret as if she had been her nursing-mother. There was a power of work in her short, stout arms, and in her surlily independent character, a will that would have kept her going for ever rather than "be fashed wi' ony feckless bits o' lasses," as she designated the young women whom from time to time she had had under her in the kitchen. She had the whole sovereignty to herself at this period; she washed, ironed, cooked, baked, brewed, churned, sewed, and did all the housework to her own entire satisfaction. She never gossiped about the ways of the Grange, or railed at her master, or tyrannized over her thoughtless young mistress: but, as in duty bound, while the first sheltered and the others fed her, she did to all true and honest service. When Margaret awoke, she heard Jacky's voice uplifted in a harsh tuneless lilt as she returned from milking; and presently the servant came into the room, all blouzed and purple with the cold, for the spring mornings in Mirkdale are almost as keen as December.

"Has my father gone out of doors yet, Jacky?" Margaret immediately inquired.

"Yes; he's been awa down to t' law croft wi' Anty this hour. What ails him, think yo'? he's no' his ain man at all;"

replied the servant, coming to the bedside, and drawing back the white curtains as a signal to Margaret that it was time to get up.

"He was tired and ill last night, and he had some work to do that kept him up late. Have you seen him this morning, Jacky?"

"I met him i' t' cow pasture, an' the like o' his countenance! I never wakened any corpse mair like a deid man's! He has never seen his bed last night, an' he's sae dour an' wisht, I'se a'most flayed to look at him. I'd gie something to hear him threaping again after his wont. I was weel nigh tempted to let t' milk skeell fall, to see if that 'ud start him out o' his odd gird. You'll no' leave him to go down to Oakfield to-day, Margaret?"

"Oh no! And, Jacky, keep the men from talking if you can; for though he is ill, there is no need that all Mirkdale should know it. He will soon be himself again."

"I wish he may wi' all my heart! You'd hear t' dog i' t' night howling? it went fair through me: it was awfu'!" said Jacky, sinking her voice to a tone of mysterious solemnity, and shaking her head lugubriously.

"There was an unusual noise, with my father being astir; and perhaps Oscar thought it was thieves breaking in," replied Margaret, feigning a carelessness that she was far from feeling. "But did he look so very bad this morning, Jacky?"

"He'd a real ill countenance, Margaret—strucken down like a man that's gotten a call or a warning. But I'd no hae you scared, my bairn! I don't know what my fule's tongue is at to talk that gate to you. He's young, is master, an'll pull through mony a hard bout o' sickness yet: we'll send for Doctor Macmichael to come and see him if he's no better to' morn."

"No, Jacky, no! whatever you think, don't let him see you notice any alteration, in him," said Margaret, eagerly.

"Very well, I won't, bairn. But get up now, for you'll be t' first thing he'll ask for when he gets home: he's coming by t' woodside already, an' look how heavy he walks! I must go an' see to making t' breakfast;" and without further parley, away went Jacky to her kitchen.

Sylvan Holt came up the green slope fronting the house, and continued to pace backwards and forwards there, until Margaret, being dressed, opened her window and wished him a blithe good morning, thinking it better not to revert to last

night's painful scene, either by look or word, unless he began it. She then ran down stairs, and with a face and voice as cheerful as usual, met him coming into the house. However, her childish gaiety seemed to annoy him, for he said abruptly—

"Go softly, Margaret, for a day or two. I feel as if we had some one lying dead in the house."

His face was, as Jacky had observed, more like that of a corpse than of a living man, so rigid were the features, so blue the skin about the mouth and temples. Breakfast was on the table, and he sat down mechanically in his place, but could not eat: Margaret urged him in vain. When the things were cleared away, and she had scattered the dole of crumbs to the birds, she began to ask him what must they do that day? He replied that all should go on as usual; so she read her chapter in the Bible and then brought out a volume of Rollin's Ancient History. She went steadily through her customary portion, found on the map the places mentioned, and then recited from memory the chief incidents in the lesson. Her father all the time sat stiffly upright in his chair, like a grieving automaton: his hands clasped before him and his head bowed down; he appeared to be soothed and stilled by the pleasant ring of her fresh young voice, but was quite oblivious to the sense of what she was reading. When she ceased, he let his head fall back against the cushions and sighed wearily.

"And now, father, what shall we do?" suggested his daughter.

"I have no heart for one of your rambles, Maggie; take your own way without me. I have letters to write," was his reply.

"Then I will stay with you, and when they are done we will have out Faustus and Crosspatch, and ride to Beckford to post them—shall we?"

"Yes, if you like."

He went to the bureau and took out several parcels of papers, which he brought to the table and began to examine, but in the midst of this occupation his thoughts perpetually wandered away from it. His hand that held a document would suddenly fall by his side, his eyes become fixed on the floor, and so he would remain, statue-like and absorbed, for half an hour together; then with an effort, violent and distressing, he would rouse himself and go on with his distasteful task.

Margaret ensconced herself by the window where the flowers stood, now filled with azaleas, one glowing flush of crimson, rose, and purple, contrasted with a mass of purest white. She had an open book on her lap, a volume of Scottish ballads—but she did not often have recourse to it: her heart was too busy and anxious, too athirst with love and fear for her father, to be quenched at the well-spring of other minds. As the morning advanced, the sun came out powerfully, and the air gained a balmy softness.

Margaret leant her head against the side of the open window that she might feel its tender glow upon her cheek, and the light luxurious dallying of the breeze with her hair. She was a true Sybarite at heart; avid of enjoyment, deliciously susceptible to every impression of beauty: eager to extract their innate germ of grace from the simplest forms of nature and life; and quick to discern a grotesque charm in what to many would be rugged, ugly, repulsive. Yet was there in her mind no strain after pleasure; no craving for imaginary happiness: her tastes were all simple and pure as her youth and her innocence. The great swells of faded brown heather towards which her eyes turned were all alight, not only with present, but past sunshine; remembrances of long September, knee-deep wadings through its purple bloom with Martin Carew or with Oscar, who now lay asleep on the grass, his dry tongue out, panting and dreaming of the cool beck that raved through the little pasture fields below, yet too lazy to get up and drink. In Wildwood there was a grand concert, whose echoes came wafted on the breeze to Margaret's ears like the singing of birds in a dream, all blended, harmonious, and soft. She let the sense of delight grow upon her; closing her eyes to listen, undiverted by the momentary gleams and shadows on the hills, until she was satiated with sweet sounds, and a restless movement of her father recalled her vagrant fancy back to him.

He had in his hand a letter—a letter so discoloured and faded that it seemed to have been written half a lifetime ago and since saturated with tears again and again. Margaret looked up at the rustling of the paper in his shaking grasp, and saw that dark glittering under his brows which had dissolved in such burning drops last night. She immediately turned aside, as if not daring to be a spy on grief like this in the bold daylight, and when she glanced at him again, the

spasm that had reduced him to almost womanish weakness was past. But it was the last thing he read, and when he had folded it he remained long buried in a gloomy reverie. Afterwards he began to write, but so slowly and with such apparent difficulty of expression, that before he had completed a single page the mid-day bell, which summoned the men in from the fields to dinner, rang. He threw down his pen impatiently and tore up what he had written: a sudden resolution had seized upon his mind.

"I will go: I will see her face again," said he in a low voice; "she is dead, and cannot reproach me any more. Yes, I will go!"

Margaret, who had only caught the last few words, approached him, asking anxiously—

"Go where, dear father?"

"I cannot tell you, Margaret, but I shall not be long away. Run and tell Jacky I want her, for I must start directly." He spoke with nervous rapidity, while his face flushed and his whole frame shook with eagerness and excitement. Margaret, who was generally prompt to obey him, now hesitated and tried to reason with him.

"Father, you are not fit to travel," said she, laying her hand gently on his arm; "or if you *must* go, let me go with you. I should be wretched, if you went alone, knowing you so ill."

"Let me be, Margaret, I cannot take you. I am not ill," replied he, releasing himself abruptly from her hold. Whatever he was intent on had, for the moment, superseded every other consideration; he began hastily to sweep the scattered papers from the table, and to thrust them back into the bureau, utterly regardless of Margaret's pleading countenance. Finding him obstinately bent on his own will, she now withstood him no longer, but summoned Jacky, who on hearing what her master proposed, attempted to lift up the loud voice of remonstrance, but was silenced by an imploring glance from Margaret. The servant received her orders under protest, as it were, and then went away to pack the little leather valise that had travelled half the world over with Sylvan Holt when he was a young man, but which for fourteen years back had lain, adding daily to its covering of idle dust, in one of the empty chambers.

Meantime, Anty and Tom received their directions about

what was to be done on the farm in the master's absence, with Margaret standing by and listening to every word with a doubtful heart, and when everything seemed to be arranged that needed arrangement, and everything prepared that needed preparation, Sylvan Holt ordered Faustus to be saddled immediately.

"And Crosspatch too," added Margaret. "I shall ride as far as Middlemoor with you, father."

He raised no objection, except to say that it would be night before she could get back to Wildwood; so she went to put on her habit. The short interval that elapsed before the horses were ready Sylvan Holt spent restlessly afoot—going from room to room, looking eagerly out at the weather, and acting in a vague hurried way that testified to the secret perturbation of his mind. It was very different to his general habits to undertake any scheme in haste: Jacky, indeed, could not remember that during her long servitude at the Grange, which dated from his coming to it, he had ever made a journey at all: and the sudden announcement of the present one quite disconcerted her. She went upstairs to Margaret, on the pretence of helping her to dress, but in reality to bid her, if she saw the opportunity, to try to dissuade her father from setting off in his present state, even at this—the last hour.

Margaret shook her head:

"It would be of no use to argue, Jacky; we should only make him angry," replied she. "His mind is fixed, and go he will. I cannot understand what is driving him to such a dangerous step just now: he will be ill on the road."

"T' excitement he's in 'll keep him up; but where is he going? I never heard that he had kith or kin. Has he told you aught, Margaret?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing; I am no wiser than yourself, Jacky."

"There's Anty bringing Faustus round to t' door, an' Crosspatch following: you maun't keep him waiting at any rate," said the servant; and Margaret ran down stairs and mounted, just as her father was about to ride off without her.

CHAPTER X.

A START ON A JOURNEY.

THE changeful aspects of her home-country were woven inextricably amongst Margaret Holt's reminiscences of this period. Each event had its background; its pervading air of chill or warmth. Years after, in alluding to events now occurring, she would say they happened on such a day—mentioning whether it rained or shone, or was only over-clouded and dull, and sometimes going into details that showed how her singular and secluded early life had trained her mind into habits of minute observation.

It was very bright noonday when she and her father rode away from the Grange in this hasty fashion, leaving Jacky at the door muttering words of ill omen and wonderment as she shaded her eyes with her hand, and watched them out of sight. The way to Middlemoor lay over Scarrfell, which stretched beyond and above Wildwood for many dreary miles. Through a cart-road cut into deep ruts the long ascent wound, sometimes between fir plantations enclosed within low walls, but commonly open to the moor. It was a laborious hill, too dangerously encumbered with loose stones to allow of riding beyond a foot's pace, and as they advanced the woods ceased altogether, the seared ling lay, wave beyond wave, on either hand, with here and there a patch of yellow furze rising out of the dusk expanse, or a huge boulder of rock lifting its grey crest crowned with the glossy green of bilberry bushes. Now and then Margaret's eye caught the glitter and ripple of a watercourse flashing in the vivid sunshine, and then suddenly lost it again amongst the heath, though its voice continued long audible. There was a perpetual play of light and shadow upon the hills, for, bright as the day was, there were hosts of flying clouds in the sky which drifted before the wind as it blew keenly over the northern ridges. In crossing the brow of Scarrfell the blast was cutting and sleety, but once the opposite descent begun, the temperature became sensibly milder.

It was a long ride of ten miles, a silent ride too, for Sylvan

Holt was harassed and excited by feverish and painful thoughts, and wherever the road appeared a degree smoother than ordinary, he was only intent on pressing forward as eagerly and as fast as possible. The afternoon was far advanced when they came in sight of Middlemoor, a grim little market town chiefly colonised by miners, whose huts straggled irregularly up the steep slope of a hill. Before reaching these they came to a point where two ways met, and here Sylvan Holt spoke to his daughter for the first time since they left the Grange, telling her that she must return home by the lower and more frequented road, as the moon did not rise until late, and she would be alone except for Oscar. Now that the silence was broken, Margaret ventured to ask her father how long he should be away from home.

"A week—perhaps, rather more, for it is a long journey; but I will write to you, Maggie," replied he, regarding her kindly.

"I wish I were going with you, father," said she with reviving courage, now that she saw he thought of her again; "you have never left me before. It will seem so strange with only Jacky in the house."

"You must go down to Oakfield oftener; Mrs. Joan Clervaux will like to have you. I almost begin to wish you had more friends, child: you and I seem to hang quite alone together." He spoke in a tone of regret—a strange tone for him.

"I don't want anybody else," said Margaret quickly, "and if I did, Martin Carew is as good as a brother to me. But I shall long to see you home again, dear father."

Sylvan Holt made no reply, though his daughter watched eagerly for some sign that might lead her to think he was relenting from his resolution to leave her behind; but none such appearing, she did not dare to risk his displeasure by again pressing her anxiety upon him, and they rode forward in silence to the "Old Horn," the only place of public entertainment that Middlemoor contained.

"Now, Margaret, you must turn back," said her father in a tone which admitted of no remonstrance. So she held out her hand, bravely swallowed down a few natural tears, and tried to say good-bye cheerfully. He kept hold of her fingers a minute or two in a way that showed how sensible he was that the parting must be hard for her, and added: "When I come

home, darling, I will explain to you why I must go, and why I go alone. God bless you, and good-bye!" And there they separated, Sylvan Holt riding forward to Haward's Cross, to take the coach going southwards, and Margaret returning sorrowfully home.

The low road made a considerable circuit round the base of Scarrfell into Mirkdale and then ran along the bottom through several small villages—Butterworth, Askrise, Carrick and Beckford. Before Margaret had gone half-way, Fernbro was shrouded in twilight haze and a dun reflection of sunset was reddening the sinuous lines of hills in the west. Oscar stretched out, still unwearied, after Crosspatch's fast trot, but the night soon fell, and as they went through Beckford town street, the cottage clocks were striking ten, and all the village seemed to be abed. Oakfield lay back twenty yards or so from the highroad, but as Margaret rode past, so hushed was the night, that she heard the hall door open and shut, and some person come out. It was Martin Carew, intent on smoking his evening cigar in the shrubbery, that agreeable solace not being allowed him within the precincts of his Aunt Joan's maiden establishment. Margaret pulled up, and waited by a wicket gate which led into the road from the grounds, until he came within speaking range, of which she was warned by the familiar perfume that he delighted in. He detected her before she spoke sitting quietly on horseback, and for a second fancied he must be under some optical delusion, for visions of Margaret always accompanied his evening smoke. Her voice reassured him, however, and he demanded what made her out at that late hour—had she dropped from the clouds? To which she replied with another question—Was Mrs. Joan Clervaux to be alone on the morrow? for if so she wanted to come and spend the day at Oakfield with her.

"I shall be at home, Margaret, if you come, I'm sure," was Martin's reply. "But you have not told me yet why you are out so late."

"My father has set off on a journey, and I have been with him as far as Middlemoor. He will be absent a week or longer."

"And you are left alone at Wildwood? Oh! that will never do! we'll send for your carpet-bag, and you may stay with us. Come in now; Oscar too!" and he opened wide the gate as if he expected his impromptu invitation would be accepted.

Margaret laughed at his eagerness: "I don't own carpet-bags," said she; "and Jacky will be on the look-out for me lest the briggadobbie should catch me, so I must ride fast; good night! I shall come to-morrow."

She was just trotting off when a servant came running under the trees with a message from her mistress, that Margaret should go up to the house and speak to her for a moment; so she turned her horse, and went in at the gate. Mrs. Joan Clervaux had retired to her room when Martin Carew went into the garden to smoke his cigar, and looking casually out of the window to see what the promise of the night was, she espied Margaret and her nephew holding a colloquy at the gate; hence the summons. She opened the sash, and putting forth her head as her young friend appeared below, made the same inquiries and received the same answers as Martin Carew had done: but her invitation was much more imperative; she ordered Margaret to dismount and come her way in immediately, and would not listen to a word in contradiction of her command.

"You will catch the toothache, Aunt Joan: put down the window, and I will bring her in!" cried Martin, highly delighted at finding himself so ably seconded: and as Mrs. Joan's head disappeared he insisted on lifting Margaret, who was quite independent of his help, from her saddle. She, however, would not enter, until a servant had been commissioned to go up to the Grange and quell Jacky's anxieties: then she went into the drawing-room, perhaps not altogether displeased at being thus unexpectedly reprieved from the solitude of her own home while her father was away. It was some time before Mrs. Joan made her appearance, as she was giving directions for her young guest's accommodation; but at length she came in, followed by a servant with all the belongings of a dainty little supper.

"I know you are hungry, Margaret, or, if you are not, you ought to be," said the old lady, pleasantly; "Martin, draw the table near the fire, so: now help her to some of that cold chicken. Never mind your hat, Gipsy, let it lie on the floor;" and everybody, Oscar included, gradually settled into a very cosy domestic party.

Margaret had touched nothing since breakfast, and was really faint; but when she began to eat there was a swelling in her throat that seemed to stop every morsel half way; and though

her cheeks were brilliant with her long ride in the night air, her eyes had an excited yet languid expression quite unusual with her. Mrs. Joan Clervaux did not fail to observe it, and began to advise an early retreat to bed, notwithstanding her nephew's remonstrance that, having sacrificed his cigar to come in and talk to Margaret, he was not prepared to lose her company so soon. By-and-by, when she had a little recovered herself, she looked brighter, and then Mrs. Joan asked where her father was gone. Margaret said she did not know.

"It was a sudden movement, then. You did not mention his leaving you when you were here yesterday."

"It was quite sudden; an idea seemed to strike him all at once, and he would set off directly. He was quite unfit to leave home, for he was very ill last night. Something had happened that upset him sadly; I never saw him so unnerved before."

"Don't you know what led to it, Gipsy?"

"He had a letter from abroad, perhaps that was it, but I cannot tell. I know nothing for certain, neither to what place he is gone nor when he will return. He only said it was a long journey, and he would explain why he took it when he came back."

Mrs. Joan started and looked anxiously at Margaret when she named the foreign letter, but recovering herself on the instant she said with an air of cheerfulness—"Well, Gipsy, I dare say he had good reasons of his own for going and not saying anything to anybody: you must stay here until he comes home again, that is all; Martin and I shall be very glad of your company. Don't be downhearted, child, but eat some more supper. Martin, put a screen before the fire; it is too hot for Margaret."

It was one of the strangest things in the world to see Margaret look out of spirits, for when anything went amiss with her she was far more in the habit of battling it down or laughing at it than of giving way. And even now she would rather have had it supposed she was tired bodily than troubled, could she have deceived the affectionate eyes that were so watchful of her. She began to ask Martin Carew what he had done at Bransby Park that day, as a means of diverting attention from herself; but Mrs. Joan was not so easily hoodwinked; she only allowed Martin to tell one incident of his visit, then promptly stopped him, bade him go and take the consolation of another cigar, and convoyed Margaret up-stairs to her bedroom.

"Now, Gipsy, I did not order a fire to be lighted, because I knew you would be tempted to sit up by it if I did, and you will be much better asleep," said Mrs. Joan, kindly: "so say your prayers, and don't forget the desolate and oppressed, or any who are sick and in misery, and depend upon it things will look brighter in the morning; they always do."

"Don't you think I need be anxious about my father, then?" Margaret asked.

"No; let anxiety rest. What profit is there in it either to him or you—wait patiently for his coming home."

"You did not see how wretchedly ill and shaken he looked."

"But I can imagine. Now, Gipsy, I will not let you talk yourself into a fever, so good-night;" and the old lady kissed her and went away.

CHAPTER XI.

A MORNING WALK.

MRS. JOAN CLERVAUX'S prophecy proved correct—matters did look brighter the next morning.

Thanks to a very complete physical weariness, a clear conscience, and perfect health, Margaret slept without dream, nightmare, or startled awakening until after six o'clock, when she heard the sound of the gardener sharpening his scythe to mow the lawn, where the little daisies lay as thick as snow flakes. Everybody at Oakfield rose early; it being an axiom of its mistress that one hour of the morning was worth two later in the day, and breakfast was always laid in the sunny book-room punctually at eight o'clock. In consideration, however, of Margaret's fatigue of the day before, Mrs. Joan issued orders that she should not be called until later, so that when she made her appearance at the usual time, fresh as a flower, blooming, bright-eyed, and cheerful, she was received as an agreeable surprise.

"Well, Gipsy, you look ready for any mischief this morning!" was Martin Carew's greeting.

"And feel so too," replied she. "Mrs. Joan, do you think

it likely my father has yet got to his journey's end? I hope he has."

"That depends entirely on where he was going to—but even if he be still on the road he will take no harm in this beautiful weather," said the old lady, pleasantly. "Now, Gipsy, I'll thank you to pour out the coffee for me this morning while I read my letters."

"I like this; it looks extremely comfortable," remarked Martin Carew, lifting his easy chair several degrees nearer to Margaret, and speaking in such a tone of thorough enjoyment that neither she nor Mrs. Joan could forbear smiling; "extremely comfortable; I feel the delights of being a domestic character intensely. Aunt Joan and I always picnic at breakfast in a rough independent way when we are alone, but you make it look like home, Margaret."

"I am afraid then her coming is not the best style of probation for your Indian experiences," said Mrs. Joan, shaking her head.

"Oh, yes, it is: I shall expect to have my coffee made for me in the same fashion when I come back again: I shall look forward to it. Margaret, what a glorious day for Deepgyll."

This last suggestion was made in a cautious whisper, but Mrs. Joan heard it nevertheless, and negatived it most decisively.

"I will not hear of it, Martin," she said, laying down the letter she had been perusing; "you must think Gipsy is as tough as bend-leather to bear riding over the country as you could do yourself. Don't tempt her to knock herself up with over-exertion, or I will not let her go out with you at all."

This threat was effectual; Martin promised to take the tenderest care of her, all the while laughing at Margaret's look of demure bewilderment at Mrs. Joan's outbreak of sharpness.

Oakfield was not an idle house by any means. Mrs. Joan Clervaux acted as her own steward and her own housekeeper; and she therefore generally had some business on hand; she also did a little in the way of farming, and made a point of going round her fields periodically to inspect the state of the rising crops and the condition of her live stock. Her factotum was one Robbie Clarke, a man who had grown old in her service and who made her interests as his own. When she was a gay young lady residing under her father's roof at Walham Castle, Robbie was a groom-boy especially attached to her per-

son ; on her father's death he followed her into her maiden retirement at Oakfield, and since then he had passed through various transitional changes, until he was become her right-hand man and a very prominent feature in Beckford annals. Who so weather-wise as Robbie ? who so knowing in all matters agricultural, pastoral, political, legal, and theological ? He was adviser-general in all difficulties, umpire in quarrels, foremost amongst the very few who dared to scoff at Tibbie Ryder's supernatural pretensions, and an authority on disputed doctrinal points (being a deacon amongst the Methodists) equal, if not superior, to the Rector himself.

After breakfast Mrs. Joan was summoned to an audience with Robbie, so Martin Carew and Margaret were consequently left to their own devices. Martin proposed to give his companion a lesson in something useful—she suggested fortification—but finally they decided to walk up to Wildwood, as Margaret thought Jacky would expect to see her, and Oscar was invited to join them, which he did with a sober satisfaction : that dog never looked thoroughly happy except when he had his young mistress entirely to himself ; he was of a keenly sensitive and rather jealous temper, and always looked with an eye of critical disfavour on any person who attracted her notice from himself. He ought to have been called Turk—Margaret sometimes did call him Turk, but she appreciated his exacting affection very highly nevertheless. He now walked solemnly, with head and tail depressed, close beside her, grateful if her idle hand tweaked his velvety ear or patted his neck, and apparently not in the least tempted even when a rabbit got up and started across the path ; he was keeping watch over Martin most likely, and would not leave Margaret in such suspicious company to pursue his vocation for a moment.

The road being very retired and the hour early, they met very few persons, but there was no lack of sprightly talk to beguile the way. On reaching the Grange they all three went straight through the house into the kitchen ; but Jacky was not there, and a terrible din above stairs announced that she had taken advantage of an empty house to delight her domestic soul in the scrubbing and scouring, lifting and shifting, of a grand spring clean. Margaret, therefore, mounted the wide, shallow-stepped staircase to where the servant was, leaving Martin sitting in the window seat of the first landing, and

found that her father's room was the present scene of action. Anty's wife was down on her knees scouring the worm-eaten boards of the floor, and Jacky, with brushes and waxed cloths, was busy polishing the wainscot, being elevated on a short ladder to reach the upper panels for that purpose. As soon as Margaret appeared, Jacky gaily descended from her perch to give her greeting, and Anty's wife sat back on her heels for a rest, and employed herself in keeping off Oscar, who was seized with a longing to paddle over the section of floor that she had just washed. The furniture was piled one piece on another in apparently inextricable confusion, and Margaret would have found no temptation to remain after exchanging a few words with the servant, had she not perceived lying face downwards upon the bed a large picture. She asked Jacky what it was, and bade her turn it over.

"It was i' master's closet, behind a heap o' trunks an' boxes that ha' never been shifted sin' he cam' to Wildwood; an' I thowt as he was out o' t' way, I'd ha' a thorough good righting an' siding," replied the servant, and assisted by Margaret she succeeded in raising the picture up against the wall.

It was a female portrait, life-size and full length.

"Who is it?" asked Margaret in an under tone.

"She's a weel-faured lady, be she who she may," observed Anty's wife, peering curiously forward, but not rising from the floor. "What bonnie een she has—yo'd say she war laughing."

Jacky was silent, but on Margaret's repeating her question she said—

"I don't know, bairn; but most likings it'll be your mother."

The figure was that of a woman in the pride and lustre of youth; very fair, brilliant, with a smooth low brow, bewildering soft dark blue eyes, and luxuriant hair flowing loosely on her neck. The dress was simple yet picturesque; it consisted of a scarlet boddice cut low on the full bosom, and a skirt of rich white satin falling in long, broad, rippled folds to the feet; the arms were bare almost to the shoulder, but a scarf of black lace trailed over one, as if worn to enhance its splendid voluptuous form and colouring. There was an air of conscious grace and loveliness in the attitude which was a little daring, perhaps also a little defiant, but the picture altogether was that of an eminently beautiful and fascinating woman. Margaret drew a few paces back to look at it again, till the soft winning eyes seemed to pursue hers, and the arch lips to smile tenderly as she gazed.

"If this was my mother, I don't remember her at all," said she gently, and then she called Martin Carew to come up and look at the portrait; telling him first whose Jacky supposed it to be. He remarked that it was a fine painting, but did not appear to admire it altogether; then he compared it feature by feature with Margaret, and was compelled to acknowledge many traits of resemblance. Margaret's brow was larger, but the beautiful eyes were the same, and the delicate mouth and the exquisite contour of the head and neck: indeed, Jacky had ample grounds for supposing it to be her mother's picture, if only from the likeness it bore to her, which grew as it was looked at.

"I should like to have it hung up in my room, Jacky, if you think my father would not mind," said she, lingering fascinated before it.

"Don't name such a thing, bairn," cried the servant, in genuine alarm at the proposition; "it 'ud be more nor our lives is worth to let him know I've shifted aught i' that closet, so oft as he has bid me let it be? Mind you never let on to him that you've seen it, or Jacky 'll go packing that blessed minute!"

"Oh! why did you bring it out?" asked Margaret, reproachfully.

"Whisht, bairn, whisht! I can't be fashed wi' sae many questions. If you'd bided down at Oakfield, where I thowt you was safe, there'd ha' been no harm done," replied Jacky, testily.

"There is no harm done as it is," said Margaret, with perfect good humour. "Put everything back just where you found it, and I will not trouble you with any more of my visits until you have had time to ransack the Grange from cellar to garret."

"Don't fly out in a pet wi' poor Jacky, then!" exclaimed the servant, with a touch of crusty penitence. "Bairn, I love you that well I'd be fain to give you your way, but if master threaped at you for ae small thing you did contrary, where'd you be?" and moving her ladder she resumed her polishing operations with great vivacity, turning a resolutely deaf ear to any further conversation.

Margaret therefore proposed that they should go down-stairs, whither Oscar waited to precede them; and Martin said he thought he ought not to have paid his first visit to the Grange in her father's absence—would he not resent it as impertinent?

"Oh, he would not care if he knew I brought you," re-

plied Margaret, and as they went out into the long corridor from which the chamber doors opened she said, did it not look like a house redolent of past times gone to decay? Martin thought it did; and notwithstanding his former scruples, when she offered to show him over it, he was very glad to accede; so she procured a large ring full of keys from Jacky, who was rather scrupulous about giving them up until they promised to do without a candle, and led the way to the top story to begin with.

They went out first upon the leads, from which elevation they could see over Litten Fell into Scartondale with its boundary hills beyond, and further still, like a mere level gray line on the remote horizon, lay the sea: Margaret's long sight could even distinguish white specks of sails upon it. The house front consisted of five gables, the three centre ones rising in height considerably above the other two: but in all this block of building—three stories besides the ground floor—there were not half-a-dozen habitable rooms. Some of the doorways were bricked up, and all the upper windows were bolted and barred with cumbrous wooden shutters. One entire end gable, by means of a side entrance and an external stone staircase, had been transformed into granaries, whilst the opposite one was converted into cow-house, cart-shed, apple chamber, and other farm-offices. In the middle gable was the porch and the spacious hall, floored, roofed, and panelled with black oak, and in those at either side were the summer and winter parlours. The kitchen, a great stone wilderness full of emptiness and echoes, lay at the back, and the bedrooms which Margaret and her father occupied were frontward over the parlours. Above the hall, and with a recess extending over the porch, was an apartment of which Margaret said, as her companion pushed open the door for their inspection, "Now, this is the Ghost room!"

She was like a sunbeam flashing into the gloom, for all over the exterior wall of that gable had twined an immense bushy growth of ivy, which had almost hidden under its interlaced and matted branches the one immense window by which the room was lighted. A few chequered gleams filtered through the green leaves upon the floor where the dust lay so thick that every footstep left its track, and the bare walls were distained with damp and mildew until not a trace of their original colour remained. It had been used as a chapel when the Catholic Langlands possessed the Grange, but no relics of its former sanctity were left.

A heap of rusty armour lay in one corner, just where it had been flung down when Jacky was put into the house by Sylvan Holt to clean a few rooms, and make them habitable for himself and his daughter; she would have sold it for old iron long ago had not Anty, who had been page boy at the Grange before the ruinous break-up of the Langland family, threatened her that if she did, something bad would be sure to haunt her. He remembered each dinted morion and shattered breastplate as having been set up in the hall, bright and stately—as if some warrior had just put them off, he told her—in the hall where for many a year the rain rained through, and the rats held high holiday, until Sylvan Holt came in and took possession. Anty revered the old family far more than the present one; he always regarded his master as an interloper who would some day yet have to go out and make room for the restoration of the old stock. Jacky had her reminiscences of the house too, but she always ceded to Anty's better and more intimate knowledge of the family, because her service had been in kitchen and dairy, but Anty had been the ladies' page; Anty had known a previous generation, and his father had held the high office of steward to the broken fortunes of the last Lord Langland. So, though Anty was a poor-spirited old man who could only groom a horse and talk by the hour of his better days, a certain awe and respect attached to him as being a visible remnant of the former state kept up at Wildwood Grange.

"What is the ghost, Margaret?" asked Martin, who remained standing in the doorway, looking in.

"Nothing visible, only a dreary moan as of some one quite worn out and despairing."

Margaret pretended to imitate the spiritual manifestation, and then laughed merrily, startling out of the silence a troop of echoes; as these died away there swelled through the room a long windy sigh; she ran out hastily into the passage behind Martin.

"If it were twilight that would really be serious," said he, laughing in his turn, and then he advanced into the room drawing Margaret by the hand. They approached the window, and stood where the sunshine glimmered through the ivy upon the floor, but just then, as if a shadow had passed over the day, all the wonted lustre faded suddenly, and a blast of cold air rushed between them.

They fell apart, and Margaret asked quickly—"Are you superstitious, Martin?"

"No; there is a broken pane in the window," replied he.

A dark object flew noiselessly out of the gloomy recess where once had stood the altar, and Margaret ran shuddering to the door.

"Come away, Martin, I don't like this room," cried she; "there may be something in Jacky's stories—at all events, I never dare make fun of ghosts."

"Ghosts, Margaret, that was only a bat!" said Martin. But with a queer contradictory solemnity, they spoke in whispers till the door was locked and they had escaped into the common-day air and sunshine of the parlour down-stairs. Even when there, they could not quite forget the haunted room, and recalled the sigh, the cold blast, and the flight of the bat, like little children who, after hearing a terrible story, dwell with fascinated reluctance on the mysterious terrors that make them quake in their beds—only Martin was laughing all the time.

Presently Margaret remembered that she was to collect a few of her belongings to carry down to Oakfield; and her companion, who never could refrain from teasing her for long together, begged to remind her especially of her thimble and bodkin, on the plea that he wanted to see if she had improved in her sewing since the last time he beheld her doing reluctant stitchwork.

She assured him she was becoming almost a skilful hand, information which he received with a tantalizing incredulity; so, to convince him of the truth of her statement, she exhibited a tolerably neat piece of plain hemming and seaming which she had accomplished under his Aunt Joan's superintendence. Martin dearly liked to make Margaret defend herself, she always did it with such a pretty earnest sincerity as if she really valued his approval; so after examining the work with an eye of connoisseurship he remarked that he did not think it particularly well done; indeed, he believed he could have done it quite as well, if not better himself.

"Mrs. Joan said it was a great improvement on my last piece," replied Margaret, rather disappointed. "You should remember, Martin, that until quite lately whenever my father saw me sewing he always pulled it away from me."

Martin broke into a merry laugh: "Oh! you dear little Gipsy!" cried he, "you are not going to pretend you liked stitchwork then, or that you like it now, are you? I give you warning that I can't believe *that*!"

"Well, I don't like it, Martin," replied she confidentially; "I really don't, but then Mrs. Joan and Jacky remonstrate with me so seriously about being like a boy, that ——"

"You are not a bit like a boy, Margaret," interrupted her companion; "unless it be that you have none of the small feminine vanities and jealousies about you. Bell Rowley is a bad imitation of a boy, I grant, but *you*, Gipsy,—you are a very woman."

"There is one thing that I should enjoy if I could do it—sketching from nature," said Margaret, brightening again under the influence of Martin's encouragement; "I have often tried, but I had no one to show me how."

"My Aunt Joan used to be quite an artist—why did you not ask her? I can set you going myself, if you like; as you are not to be knocked up you shall have your first lesson this afternoon!" Martin was quite eager and interested, and so was she.

"There is nothing I should like better;" said Margaret, colouring high with delight; "but you will have to be very patient with me, Martin. I have often tried to draw flowers, and I have done this house over and over again, but I never succeeded in making it look right: it was all out of perspective, but I could not alter it properly even when I read the rules in a book at Oakfield."

"Let me look at some of your sketches, Margaret: I dare say they are better than you will allow."

Margaret immediately brought out a handful of papers from the table drawer and laid them before him. Martin took up one after another, and examined them quietly for several minutes, while she waited his opinion with unfeigned anxiety; and seeing that she was diffident but earnest on this subject, he checked the temptation to tease her again, and said as gravely and sincerely as she could wish, "You have a bold clear touch and a shrewd eye, Gipsy, if you are ignorant of rules. You will draw well—really well. Not in a pottering school girl fashion, but with taste, even with genius."

"Now, Martin, I don't want *you* to flatter me. Do you mean what you say?"

"Yes, I do. You might have learnt of a master for a dozen years and have done nothing so good as these if you had been without real taste. Talent even in the rough goes much further than polished mediocrity."

She looked greatly pleased : " Do you think so, Martin ? I am glad ; now, I shall work regularly, and the wet days will never seem long again—it will be such a resource. Let me find my pencils before we go." And from the same receptacle as the drawings she produced the rude common tools bought at Middlemoor, with which she had accomplished them.

" Did you never tell Aunt Joan ?" Martin asked.

" No ; but I will tell her now, and she will help me when you are gone. Sometimes I wish you were not going so far off, Martin."

" So do I, but it can't be helped : I am glad you feel that though, Gipsy ; I thought the other evening that you did not care so much as I wished you should. But we won't talk ourselves into the dismal so long beforehand. Have you gathered together all you want ?"

" Yes, I think I have : but I must just run back and speak to Jacky for one moment."

Margaret was of so thoroughly good a nature that she would have been very reluctant to leave Wildwood without composing the servant's injured feelings by a few kind words ; but as Jacky was very easily propitiated, she almost immediately rejoined Martin, who waited for her in the porch. He had a proposition to make which had occurred to him in her absence, and as she came out he said, pointing to a bare part of the stones, " Margaret, let us bring a cutting from that crimson winter rose that grows up the verandah at Oakfield, and plant it here. How high do you think it will reach in five years ?"

" Up to the first story windows, perhaps. I will have it at my side of the porch, and then I shall watch its progress as it creeps higher and higher. The first rose it bears that I can gather by leaning out of my window, I'll send to you, Martin. Then you will be nearly coming home, perhaps—I hope you won't stay ten years away from us."

These thoughtless, affectionate, frank-hearted speeches did not please Martin Carew so much as they ought to have done. He would have preferred a little suggestive shyness ; would rather have had Margaret less sisterly, in short. But she went on in her perfect guilelessness, telling him that the birthday of the rose should be marked yearly by a nail driven into the wall, so that when he came back to Mirkdale he might see its annual growth : and she never observed that he did not

respond to her promises, being quite satisfied with whatever he chose to say or do, and totally unsuspecting of what he was experiencing.

The position of the rose-tree settled, they loitered slowly down the woodside and through the fir-tree glade into Beckford Lane, where they met Mrs. Joan Clervaux going up to Greatorex Mills, and Robbie Clarke marching, as his respectful custom was, about two paces behind her, with his long neck craned forward to hear any remark she might have to make, and his hands clasped behind him over the small of his back.

"This is gracious weather, sir; one may almost see the grass grow," said he, touching his hat to Martin Carew.

Martin agreed with him, but Margaret, who had been a great pet with the old man when a child, and had not yet grown up to a proper awe of his character, began to rally him on a failure of a recent prediction of his that "there'd be no rain for four an' twenty hours," which had deluded her into taking a long ride on an unpromising day, and sent her home drenched.

"I did not say there'd be no *sleet* and no *snow*, Miss Margaret," retorted Robbie, who, like oracles in general, could never be proved in the wrong. "And I did not speak for Scartondale either. We'd no *rain* at Oakfield, only *hail*!"

Margaret laughed and said: "You are always right, Robbie! Now tell me and tell me truly, will it be fine weather to-morrow?" Then she whispered aside to Martin: "If it is, we *will* go to Deepgyll," and he nodded acquiescence.

"Yes; it'll be fine for ever so many to-morrows. There'll only be flying showers this month—nothing worse;" proclaimed the seer.

"No hail, nor sleet, nor snow?" asked Margaret, with mischievous pertinacity, but Robbie would pledge himself to nothing further.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux was the owner of Greatorex Mills, the tenant of which had sent down to her that morning with a message about certain improvements that he wanted making, and she and Robbie Clarke were now on their way thither to see about them; so Martin and Margaret turned back with them, and while the business of pulling down and rebuilding was being talked over in the miller's parlour, they two sat on a stone bench outside watching the huge water-wheel flashing

round in the sunshine, and the foaming mill stream rushing down between its green banks.

In after years these two, now resting happy and silent in the bright May noon, remembered with vivid distinctness every incident of this day, so trivial in the telling, so insignificant even in the acting, for it became a great epoch in both their lives, though while it was passing it seemed no more marked than many another day. Martin had taken up a handful of sparkling gravel, and was casting it pebble by pebble into the water, checking off his sanguine hopes, perhaps; when it was all gone they looked in each other's face and laughed—that idle light-hearted laugh which is the very peach-bloom of gaiety!

The sound caused Oscar, who had made himself into a footstool for his dear young mistress, to open his intelligent eyes and glance up at them interrogatively, as if desiring to know why they broke the pleasant silence in that unmeaning way? Perhaps an idea occurred to him that it might not be so very unmeaning after all, for when he had given it a few moments' consideration, he rose gently up and thrust his long nose confidently into Martin's hand—the first unsolicited mark of favour he had ever shown him.

"Oscar has a thought, now, if he could but speak and tell it to us," said Margaret. "I often wish he could talk to me."

"I'll interpret for him! he is adopting me as his master," replied Martin, looking more at the dog than at her.

"Let us see if he will stay with you when I go away;" and she set off down the lane. Oscar bounded after her, came back to Martin at his call, then pursued her again. Margaret stopped, pointed to Martin, and said, "Go to him, stay by him;" Oscar obeyed, but looked back wistfully two or three times to see if she were following; when he found she was not, he licked Martin's hand and left him, but left him slowly and with a divided heart, as it were. Martin whistled and shouted, "Oscar, Oscar, old fellow!" and Margaret walked swiftly and silently away, but in a few minutes he was beside her; she feigned to drive him back and spoke in a loud imperative voice, but Oscar dragged himself abjectly to her feet, and took the end of her plaid in his mouth, so she fell to caressing him and calling him a variety of flattering names, which soon revived his spirits; and then, instead of returning to the mill, where she had left Martin, she began to gather wild flowers in the hedgerow.

When he overtook her with Mrs. Joan and Robbie Clarke, she said triumphantly—

“Oscar remains faithful to his first allegiance; but I am afraid we have wounded his feelings in the trial.”

“I did not know you were going to leave me altogether. Why did you not come back?” asked Martin.

“Because I knew you would follow soon; so I stayed to gather these:” exhibiting some primroses. Martin was disconcerted for a moment, but recovered himself when she gave him a cluster of the flowers and bade him press them in his Bible to keep him in mind of that day, and she would do the like. Martin’s went to India and back with him, but Margaret lost hers before the year was out.

“What are you two sentimentalizing over?” inquired Mrs. Joan, drily; “and who has offended Oscar?”

“Oscar is becoming very sensitive and hard to understand,” said Margaret; “I thought a while since he was going to forsake me for Martin, but he has reconsidered it, and elects to stay with his old love—don’t you, my beauty?”

“I thought he meant a *united* ownership,” said Martin, but in so low a tone that nobody heard him. Robbie Clarke smiled grimly.

“I think, Miss Marg’ret, you’re getting into metaphysics when you talk o’ t’ dog’s feelings; I’m of opinion Oscar loves a bone better nor either o’ you,” said he, respectfully in tone, but sarcastically in manner.

“Robbie, I shall quarrel with you if you say such things of him! He has the heart of a lion! noble fellow!” cried his mistress.

“And I guess a lion would enjoy *eating* you more than aught else!” persisted Robbie.

“Well, and don’t people say when they love each other very much, ‘I could eat you up?’” retorted Margaret.

“Oh, Gipsy, I could eat you up!” whispered Martin, but Margaret only laughed, and told Mrs. Joan what he said, and she called them a pair of foolish children.

CHAPTER XII.

A GAME AT CROQUET.

THE drawing lesson was not forgotten in the afternoon, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux being admitted into the secret of Margaret's wishes, added her meed of praise and encouragement to her nephew's, so after dinner master and pupil went to work.

"You shall make a sketch of Oakfield for me to take away to India," said Martin; and, as Margaret thought the suggestion charming, a chair, footstool, and stand were carried out, and placed in an eligible position at the remotest corner of the lawn.

The house itself was neither picturesque nor pretty, but it was backed by some of the towering forest trees from which the place had its name, and a great bay window at one side of the door, with a verandah over it, broke the regular line of the front, and threw a shadow across the grass, which Margaret at once discerned as artistically available. She had a firm touch and a quick eye, but reflecting on the destiny of her labours, she took assiduous pains to make the sketch a success. Martin at first stood by her, but, at length, finding how little direction she needed, he said humbly—

"Margaret, do you mind my having a smoke?" and as she replied, "No, she was used to it, and rather liked the scent of a good cigar out of doors," he sat down on the grass near her, and resting on his elbow with his head on his hand, glided presently into a beatific day-dream, from which he roused himself up, now and then, to look in his companion's intent face and to ask her how she was going on.

The weather was warm and sunny as an ideal midsummer day. The airs stirring amongst the trees were just strong enough to shower down the white and rosy blossoms in the orchard, and to waft fragrant breaths from the lily-of-the-valley bed, the jonquils, and the pale, heavy-headed, double narcissus. It was the very time for young hopes to bud, and young hearts to blow, or even for old ones to revert with wistful pleasure to their merry springtide past and gone. Martin's eyes dwelt on Margaret's quiet face with lingering covetous tenderness; if,

when her glance met his, she had looked at all conscious, he might have spoken perhaps, and thus have changed the course of two lives; but her maiden meditations were calm and unembarrassed, her cheek softly coloured with its natural blush, and her gaze as steadfast and unshrinking as a little child's. Martin wisely held his peace—but in so doing he added one more to the long list of lost opportunities which never return.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux, who was at her writing-table by the drawing-room window, looked often at the young pair upon the lawn, and began to build for them a beautiful castle in the air, from whence she descended to a vision of certain ruins gleaming white and lonely far in the dim vista of her own faithful memory. Though she had contemned Martin Carew's rash declaration that if ever he married a wife it should be Margaret Holt, such a consummation of his desires would have crowned her projects for him very happily; but, like most elderly people who have seen half a lifetime of fine schemes disperse into thin air, she would not suffer her mind to dwell on so remote a possibility as their union; and the idea of an engagement—which had actually dared to suggest itself to Martin's mind as something eligible and very delightful—she would have negatived decidedly had she known it. As the excellent old lady watched the two, thus thinking, preying, and remembering, the time passed swiftly away, and she was not half through her daily instalment of correspondence when she was interrupted by an invasion of visitors from Bransby Park. Margaret, also, was so deeply interested in her work, and Martin so far astray in the Elysian wilds of imagination, that neither was at all conscious of being observed until a loud, familiar voice cried out—

"My life, what a picture of rural felicity!" and Miss Bell Rowley advanced across the lawn, grinning and bowing with a significant and sarcastic courtesy.

Martin felt anything but complimentary towards her as she went on, in her free and easy way—

"I'm sorry to break in on your innocent and improving occupation, but we have driven four miles for the chance of a game at croquet, and we can't be disappointed."

"Who has come besides yourself?" asked Martin not very civilly, for at that moment he was inclined to hate Bell with vivacity.

"Colonel Fielding, mamma, and Fanny: did you not hear us

drive round to the door? No? Then you must have been engrossed?"

"Who is Colonel Fielding?"

"You would have seen him yesterday if you had chosen to stay half an hour longer, as I entreated you: he came directly you left."

"That does not tell me who he is."

"Well, then, he is the knight *sans peur et sans reproche*. Ask Mrs. Joan: she knows him, and all his people too: she must have met them at Walham Castle. But come, throw away your cigar, and be my partner, Martin Carew. Do you play croquet, Margaret Holt?"

Margaret said she could play a little, but not well, and Bell Rowley proceeded to arrange and order in her usual fashion.

"There will be two couples only," said she: "Fanny need not play, and Colonel Fielding can be your partner" (to Margaret), "you will have him to teach, for he knows nothing about the game. But where are the hoops?"

"The lawn was mown this morning, and the gardener took them out, but we can soon replace them," replied Martin.

"Oh yes, I know where they are kept," and Bell, intent on her game, ran off to the tool-shed, whither Martin reluctantly followed, to bring the balls and mallets. They then began to fix the hoops in the ground as the game requires.

First a stick: then three hoops at equal spaces of three yards from each other: then three more hoops at a certain distance to the right and three to the left about two paces in advance, but parallel with the first set, opposite to which are placed three more, while at the other limit is set a second stick. The game is played with balls and mallets. Each person has a ball, which being placed beside one or other of the sticks, he must endeavour to strike through the first hoop: if he miss it, he must stand by until each of his antagonists has had his turn, but if the ball go through the first hoop, he may strike it again and send it through the second, again and send it through the third, again and bring it into position for passing through the hoops on the left. Every time a hoop is passed through, the player is privileged to go forward. When all the balls are out, if the ball of one player strikes another he may croquet his antagonist—which he does by placing the two balls close together, setting the left foot firmly on his own ball, and striking it so that the adversary ball (if the blow be strongly and

skilfully dealt) flies off to the furthest limit of the ground, which, of course, lessens its chance of success; for the game is won by whoever drives his ball through all the hoops in order, and brings it back first to the stick, from which the start was made.

The spaces being measured out, the hoops were speedily fixed in the ground by Martin Carew and Bell Rowley. Bell was immensely fussy and noisy; her tongue was never still for a moment, and Martin marvelled secretly how anybody so stout could run to and fro and talk with such unwearied vehemence (for every sentence was uttered in a declamatory tone, as if it were a famous moral dogma) without losing breath; but loss of breath was a casualty that apparently never happened to Bell. While they were thus employed, Margaret Holt began very reluctantly to put up her unfinished sketch, and she had just closed her portfolio when Mrs. Joan Clervaux, Lady Rowley, her second daughter Fanny, and Colonel Fielding, issued forth upon the lawn. Bell immediately took upon herself the ceremony of introduction and called out abruptly as they drew near—

“This is Sylvan Holt’s daughter, mamma! Colonel Fielding, you may be her partner, and we shall beat you easily, Martin Carew and I.” Bell generally adopted the Christian name of her acquaintance at a second interview, she thought it set them on better terms both with themselves and her to dispense with all formalities of address; and it was very rarely indeed she found anybody who resented her impertinent familiarity.

At their queer introduction Colonel Fielding and Margaret looked towards each other and bowed, but neither spoke at first, and Margaret began rather nervously to roll her ball to and fro with her mallet until her partner elect at length begged her to enlighten his ignorance by explaining to him the rules of the game. She was beginning to do so accurately enough when Bell, the oracle, stood forth, took the words out of her mouth, and delivered a lecture on the science of croquet which quite confused the little knowledge he had already gained of it. While Margaret was speaking he listened with deference, but as soon as Bell gave tongue, he turned aside and addressed himself to Martin Carew, which was rude, perhaps, but let it be pleaded in his excuse that the Bell-clapper had been dinning in his ears all the way from Bransby, and his patience was fairly worn out.

Colonel Fielding would have been a noticeable man in any place or any circumstances, with his fine dark face, keen deep set eyes, and soldierly bearing, but he appeared especially so now, in juxtaposition with Martin Carew's handsome but comparatively boyish figure and fresh-coloured visage. Bell Rowley's sarcastic description of him was plainly suggested by his appearance, and Margaret, shyly pleased that he had been allotted to her as a partner, thought to herself that he was equal to her ideal of any of those grand stalwart knights of old who figured in her favourite ballads and romances.

Before the game could begin, there was a little dispute to settle between Bell and Fanny Rowley; Fanny wanted to play singly, and Bell would not let her. Their mother was obliged to arbitrate betwixt them, and she admonished Fanny to stand out of the way and not be tiresome to her elder sister, whose part Lady Rowley always took, not from any preference, but for peace and quietness sake, not daring to contend with her imperious daughter. Lady Rowley was a plump florid person, a softened maturity of Bell, and Fanny was a fat, self-complacent, calm, good-natured little body, who would have been a comely dairy-maid, but who was sadly deficient in all the personal requisites of fine ladyhood. The quarrel settled to Bell's triumph, she put forth her claim to commence the game, and nobody raising a voice against it, she set her ball by the stick, threw herself into an attitude of confidence, poised her mallet, cried aloud, "Now look how *I* do it!" and struck her ball so far aslant that it passed outside the hoops and far beyond them into a very disadvantageous position, seeing she would have to return a considerable distance to get back in front of the first hoop. Little Fanny laughed, which all the others forgave her, but Bell began a wordy demonstration of the causes which led to her failure, instancing the mallet's being slightly chipped on one side, the ball being lighter than she supposed, and her hand being out for want of practice.

It was now Margaret Holt's turn, and she, not intent on making any astounding display of skill, drove her ball through the first and second hoops with one direct stroke, and through the third in the same manner, and then sent it in front of the line of hoops to the left, and there she stopped. Bell Rowley at once demanded that they two should change mallets, on the plea that Margaret had taken the one that she was accustomed to play with. Margaret gave it up without demur, and Bell re-

ceived it, saying emphatically: "*Now* you will see what execution I shall do."

She, however, had to wait until Martin Carew and Colonel Fielding had played their game. The former sent his ball through all three hoops at once, and Bell being his partner, admonished him vehemently to croquet Margaret Holt's ball, and when he aimed at it and missed, she scolded him pretty roundly, while he laughed and shrugged his shoulders. Colonel Fielding now took his turn, and though he had never seen the game before, by dint of a steady hand and a correct eye, he made the same stroke as Martin Carew had done, then croque'd his partner's ball—as the rules permit—drove it through the three left-hand hoops, sent his own after it, and left his own ball in front of the third set of hoops, with Margaret's only a couple of paces behind it. Bell was now in a state of almost dancing excitement, which was not lessened by Fanny's crying out maliciously—

"You don't look much like winning this game, Bell!" and in this frame of temper she made a very ineffectual return stroke, and her ball went further astray than ever, which again necessitated explanation.

While she was talking, Margaret Holt went through the third line of hoops, struck the stick beyond and began to return; but failing in one of her strokes, her ball hit a hoop and rebounded, at which Bell clapped her hands—dropping her mallet for the purpose; and then insisted on showing how the accident might have been avoided.

Martin Carew following next, succeeded in his attempt to croquet Colonel Fielding's ball, which he sent flying off into the evergreens at the furthest end of the lawn; then he croque'd Margaret's, and sent it off to join her partner's in the same place. From that moment he went on triumphantly, keeping well ahead, for Colonel Fielding and Margaret had several turns in bringing back their balls to the positions from which they had been driven, and Bell's, in sporting phrase, was nowhere. Martin could not be overtaken, and he came in and hit the stick first.

"We have won! we have won!" shouted Bell; "I told you we should: we will play you again and beat you again too!"

Colonel Fielding, who was not the man to relish being beaten even in a game of croquet, told her she was the last in the race by a long way.

"No matter," returned she, "Martin Carew and I played partners, therefore *we won, we won, we won!*" and she ran from one to another of the lookers-on announcing the fact with exuberant glee.

Fanny looked at her sister scornfully, and told her she had played badly, she could play fifty thousand times better herself; and possibly a second quarrel might have ensued, had not another party of visitors appeared in the avenue. These were Mr. Wilmot, Rector of Beckford, his wife, and a bachelor gentleman named Paley. Bell Rowley had told them where she was going and what for, in the morning, and had taken upon herself to invite them to Oakfield, so that their appearance was not quite so accidental as it seemed.

The Rector was a small vivacious man, very kind-hearted, very well-intentioned, and most desirous of doing his duty; only sometimes his ideas of what the said duty was seemed but ill-defined; he galloped about the parish dropping religious tracts here and there; he gave away half-crowns and bottles of wine, and begged the people in his twenty-minutes long sermons to go to church and keep away from the public house; and jested a little sometimes about his office with the young ladies, on the plea of being their spiritual adviser, in a way that would have been styled *flirting* in a less reverend character. Some of his sedate parishioners found fault with him in consequence, but everybody agreed that the little man's heart was in the right place. His wife was a tall fair Irishwoman, very fluent of tongue, and rather inclined to romance, but equally as kind and as well-meaning as her husband.

Mr. Paley was of quite another order of man. He gloried in one of those cheap reputations for wisdom and superiority of character which are earned by the possession of a bald head, an owlish solemnity of expression, and a peculiar slowness and indistinctness of speech. The man never either said anything or did anything, yet all Mirkdale regarded him as a scholar and profound thinker. He encouraged the idea by occasionally delivering sententious paradoxes, to the end that all brilliant talkers are people of small brain, just as shallow streams babble most—and his converse proposition was that silent, stupid folk are the solid and reliable props of the temple of wisdom. His step partook of the slow, deliberate density of his mind; his every gesture, indeed, was fettered by it, so that when he proposed to take a mallet and engage in a game of croquet with

the young people, his offer was not received with any great satisfaction. He solemnly invited Mrs. Wilmot to join also; and then the rector, with an incidental remark that croquet was a strictly clerical game, challenged Fanny Rowley to be his partner.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Lady Rowley watched the progress of the game from a garden seat under the verandah: it was as good a position for the study of individual character as any other, and croquet seemed a favourable medium for the display of peculiar traits. Mr. Paley walked deliberately round his own ball, made solemn pauses of consideration over other people's, and wasted every one's patience by remote calculations of what he might, could, would, and should do if his ball were otherwise placed, and invariably ended with a feeble abortive stroke that missed its aim. Colonel Fielding was prompt and accurate; he had brought no experience to the game, but his eye and memory seized and embraced its every chance: Martin Carew was hasty and sudden, and frequently overlooked his opportunities of harassing his antagonists, but he had skill and nerve: the Rector was careless and uncertain; he made strokes good or bad with equal indifference: Bell Rowley's play has been already shown: Margaret Holt and Fanny Rowley were almost equal in practice and both free from any desire to astonish by their ingenious strokes: and Mrs. Wilmot was scarcely less vehement and noisy than Bell. They talked one against the other from first to last, contradicting, wrangling, and arguing vociferously: but to give honour where honour is due, Bell had decidedly the best of the match: right or wrong she *would* not be silenced, and Mrs. Wilmot, with flushed face and heated temper, at last acknowledged herself ignominiously talked down by a chit of a girl!

When it was not their turn to play, Colonel Fielding and Margaret stood side by side discussing Mirkdale and its beauties. The Colonel said he had long been a stranger in it, but he professed to have felt formerly a loving admiration for the simple grand character of much of its scenery. He spoke as if he wanted to excite the latent enthusiasm of his young partner, who seemed to him a pleasant fresh study of woman-nature, and if so, he succeeded to his will. Margaret's momentary self-conscious shyness past, she talked to him with her natural lively grace, not paring down her phrases to baldness as conventional propriety sometimes drills woman into doing, but

colouring her words with quaint vagrant fancies and her thoughts with odd turns of expression such as he was not used to hear. Then her voice seemed to caress the ear with its soft, sweet, changing tones, and her face, while animated, was still beautiful, gentle, and pure womanly. Colonel Fielding was thinking to himself that he should like to see more of this "rare little girl," as in his own mind he called her, when Bell Rowley screamed out shrilly—

"Colonel Fielding, it is your turn to play! I wish you would mind the game!"

He both looked and felt impatient of the interruption, went and struck his ball carelessly, and immediately returned to Margaret; she, blushing slightly, ventured on a rebuke, telling him that her ball was first, and that if he did his best, perhaps they should win the game.

"Would you like to win?" asked he—"well, then, I won't risk our chance again."

They actually did win, and as soon as the fact was proclaimed, Bell Rowley flung down her mallet, and said she should play no more that day, everybody was so stupid! A third game took place without her, and then the diversion of croquet ended. Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Lady Rowley came down to the group on the lawn, and there was the ten minutes' regulation gossip before they separated. The Wilmots and Mr. Paley left together as they had come, but the Rowley party was not in any haste: in fact Bell had not yet accomplished all she came to do.

"Were you not speaking of a ride to Deepgyll Fall some day this week?" said she, attacking Margaret Holt point blank. Martin Carew overheard her and came to the rescue; but he was too late; Margaret, unused to evasion, had acknowledged they were.

"Then, don't you think we might as well make a party and go all together? Colonel Fielding, we want you. These two" (pointing to Martin and Margaret) "are going to Deepgyll Falls—let us fix a day and go with them. What does everybody say to to-morrow?"

Colonel Fielding expressed himself charmed with the plan, and turning to Margaret said he should be glad to have her for a guide in revisiting the picturesque scenes that they both so much admired, to which she replied with a smile and an inconsequent "yes." Martin was vexed and astonished at her ready acquiescence, though it did not exactly appear how she could

have extricated herself by saying less, and bidding them settle the ride amongst themselves, he marched off in high dudgeon to gather up the balls and mallets that were strewn about the lawn.

"Then let it be to-morrow," Bell authoritatively decided. "To morrow—we'll meet at Tibbie Ryder's at half past eleven." And having gained her end, she announced the arrangement to her mother and Mrs. Joan Clervaux as settled, and proposed to have the carriage round at once, saying she was sure their visitation had been long enough.

When they were gone, Martin Carew began to express his discontent at losing all his promised pleasure in the ride to Deepgyll by the intrusion of Bell Rowley and Colonel Fielding; he seemed to the full as jealous of sharing Margaret's company with any one else as Oscar was: but she bade him never mind; she thought the excursion must be pleasant, no matter who went, and then she returned with alacrity to her sketch. Martin brought out a chair for himself and gave her the benefit of his society, but he was much less amiable than before the game of croquet. He would cross-question her as to what she thought of this person and what she thought of the other, especially of Colonel Fielding—and Margaret answered vaguely, and asked him if it were possible she could have made up her mind about any of them on so short an acquaintance, which annoyed him the more, for he fancied her evasive.

After her letters were written, Mrs. Joan Clervaux also joined them, and then Martin immediately began to ask who and what Colonel Fielding was—his tone and manner betraying an unaccountable pique.

"You are going to tilt at a windmill, Martin," was Mrs. Joan's apparently irrelevant reply.

"Not at all; but it is not pleasant to have his company thrust upon us whether we will or no. Margaret and I were to have gone to Deepgyll by ourselves, and now Bell Rowley has invited herself and him to go with us. I would rather not have gone at all."

Margaret could not help laughing and rallying him on his ill humour, but Mrs. Joan, who understood its cause better, received it in silence, and felt, that all things considered, it was perhaps fortunate that Gipsy and he were not to have a solitary ride.

"Bell Rowley said you knew Colonel Fielding's family,

Aunt Joan, who are they?" Martin presently inquired, more calmly.

"Bell is mistaken. I knew his mother before her marriage, when she was Geraldine Favell, but I have never met her since. The Fieldings are a good Scotch family of considerable wealth, but I am only acquainted with them by hearsay, except with the Colonel, of whom I saw a great deal some years back, when he was no older than yourself, Martin."

"I hate a Scotchman, don't you, Gipsy?" whispered Martin, regarding her with a queer expression.

Margaret now saw his drift and replied mischievously: "No! on the contrary, I approve of the one we have seen to-day, he is like Bayard—Bell Rowley said so."

This declaration and the manner of it was balm of comfort to him; he thought it spoke volumes of indifference, so he took another cigar and gradually smoked himself into a more genial temper. By-and-by Margaret's sketch was finished, signed with her name, and the date, and put away affectionately in his desk, to be taken out and looked at again and yet again, as a remembrance of Oakfield, of Gipsy, and of a thousand vain unspoken hopes.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT DEEPPGYLL.

If Margaret Holt had been left up at Wildwood alone she would have felt her father's absence much more than she did, though as it was, not an hour of the day passed that her thoughts did not recur to him, and follow him in imagination on his solitary journey. But Mrs. Joan Clervaux discouraged her occasional fits of reverie, and Martin Carew either talked himself or made her talk until it was not easy to get even five minutes to weave a tissue of possible calamities, had she been so inclined.

Oakfield was a very pleasant place to stay at, for there she was amongst friends of whose liking she felt secure. Even the servants who had known her from a little one (for Mrs. Joan

Clervaux was a lady in whose service men and women stayed till they grew gray) delighted to see her come about the house. She was so modest, kind, and thoughtful, so gay and good humoured, so ready to oblige, and so grateful for the smallest assistance that any of them rendered her, that they waited on her hand and foot for the mere pleasure of her thanks.

Perhaps the one who favoured her most was James Groves, who kept the horses, drove his mistress out, and followed her in her not unfrequent rides. He was a comely little man with a moon visage and sandy hair, almost elderly now, but of that order of men who preserve something of the boy to the last hour of their lives. Though it was in horses that his soul chiefly delighted, he was a well-conducted and even religious man; (why are a taste for horses and a taste for respectability so rarely found united in one and the same person?) Margaret had won his highest esteem and regard by the splendid way in which she sat her restive mare Crosspatch; he thought and said she beat for riding every lady he had ever seen. Miss Bell Rowley rode well, but she was dumpy and liked to show off, and James did not approve of that in women-folk; then she talked boastfully of being able to sit any vicious horse that could be shown her, and he was incredulous of her skill. He knew she had thrown down one animal and broken its knees in trying to make an exhibition of her cleverness, and he would have been very sorry to trust her with any horse of *his*. But as for Margaret Holt, her he would trust with anything, for she knew what horses were and loved them. James was holding forth in this strain to Martin Carew, who did not show any disposition to silence him, when Margaret, shortly after breakfast, came into the stable-yard with a lump of sugar and a piece of bread for Crosspatch, who, since her craziest fillyhood, had been used to these delicate attentions.

Crosspatch was a dark bay mare in high keeping and admirably groomed, almost thorough-bred, and without a flaw in her beauty. James Groves said she would be worth a couple of hundred guineas, but for that fidgetty temper of hers, which showed itself in her wild and dangerous eye. At the sound of Margaret's voice and step she turned her head round as she stood in the stall, and arched her fine neck under her mistress's caressing hand. The sensible creature loved her, and when Margaret had administered her dainties and was going away,

she followed her with her eye as if sorry to lose sight of her : the girl told her they were to set off to Deepgyll at eleven o'clock, and bade her be on her best behaviour ; no doubt, Crosspatch understood the warning tone of the injunction, for she had been used to that voice ever since she was a day old, and even when she was out to grass and Margaret came into the field, at her call she would trot to meet her and follow her as closely as a pet dog.

That all servants, poor people, and animals loved this young girl was a sign, I take it, that she was truly lovable and truly good in these early days. Oscar came up to her where she stood talking to Martin Carew and pushed his head under her arm, and old Floss, the Oakfield house-dog, who had retired on a pension long since, was toothless and had given up barking as a waste of his short breath, stretched at his chain, and whined mournfully because he could not get at her, and before leaving the yard she went up to him and inquired after his health "for all t' world," said James Groves, "as if he'd been a Christian."

In the course of the morning a groom rode over from Bransby Park with a note from Bell Rowley to Martin Carew bidding him go down to the Rectory, and invite Mr. and Mrs. Wilmot to join their riding party : she said that an excursion with so few people was always stiff and dull, and that besides Colonel Fielding she should bring a Mr. Barlow and Bertha Leven, who were staying at Bransby, and Fanny and her brother Tom, an impish lad of thirteen. Mrs. Joan Clervaux thought Bell very impertinent, and Martin's wrath was redoubled, but Margaret said nothing, and only seemed to anticipate pleasure in the ride. As there was no help for it, Martin was obliged to walk off to the Rectory with Bell's note, and he presently returned with a sulky announcement that the Wilmots would be glad to go. One of the primary elements in the success of a party of pleasure is that people should meet exactly at the appointed time ; delays and frivolous waitings for dilatory arrivals always sour somebody's temper, and that probably pricks the individual all the day after, even if it do not pervade the entire party. Mrs. Joan Clervaux kept this fact before their eyes, so Martin Carew, Margaret, and James Groves in attendance, contrived to start from Oakfield with so nice a punctuality and calculation, that they rode into Beckford village from one side as the Bransby Park people entered

it from the other. The Wilmots were to wait for, but only for about five minutes; and Tibbie Ryder issuing forth with letters to distribute, those who received any occupied the interval in reading them, while the rest rode to and fro, all the village folks being on their door steps to watch the gay cavalcade. When the Rector and his wife appeared, both as beaming and full of apologies as good-natured people always are, there ensued a discussion as to which of two roads they should take. Deepgyll was quite at the head of Mirkdale, and could be reached by a road that ran through the moor on the north side of the valley or by one low down on the southern slope. It was finally settled to go by the former, from whence, the morning being deliciously bright and clear, many fine views would be visible, lest ere their return, mists, so common and so opaque in these districts, should rise and overcloud the horizon.

At this second start Bell Rowley contrived to effect a change of companions and to secure for herself Martin Carew. She had ridden from Bransby with Colonel Fielding, but she was not particularly at ease in his society. He was too grave, too old, or too clever for her, and would never respond to the sometimes coarse, and almost always flippant, boastful, or ill-natured trash that flowed without let or pause from her tongue. He, therefore, fell back and rode with Margaret, quite intentionally seconding Bell's manœuvres to get rid of him, for her tawdry pretentiousness was inexpressibly wearisome, and Margaret's freshness and even ignorance were doubly charming by comparison. Martin Carew, being younger, was a degree more tractable than Colonel Fielding, but it certainly had not entered into his pre-arrangements to flirt over a ten mile ride with Bell while somebody else was engrossing Margaret, and at every possible opportunity he reined back his horse and spoke to his favourite, leaving Bell to proceed alone. She, however, had not the smallest hesitation in recalling him to her side, or in telling him she was shocked at his want of common politeness—not to mention gallantry. Martin would not respond to her raillery, and got visibly out of humour at last, for their conversation dwindled to a monologue, which Bell sustained with her customary vivacity.

The makeweights of the party paired off as chance or inclination suggested. Mr. Barlow and Bertha Leven took the lead and kept it, apparently very much afraid lest anybody else

should join them, for they had a peculiar and mutual interest in each other as lovers. He was a dark shrewd-eyed man, a barrister by profession, and she was a fortune, a merry one, whose face was a perpetual open-mouthed laugh. Behind them followed Fanny and Tom Rowley quarrelling, and then the Rector and his wife, neither of them very well pleased that a day out was thus turned into a conjugal *tête-à-tête*. Martin and Bell came next—Martin who had given himself over bound tongue and sense to vexation, and Bell loud and noisy with joke and repartee : but at last it dawned upon him as one means of delivering himself from the Bell incubus, that the Wilmots ought not to be left to each other, so he pressed on and joined the lively Irish lady, while the Rector wheeled his horse round and brought it up beside Bell. She felt enraged to the last degree, but had policy enough not to break out there and then, and the Rector, not being very quick-sighted to what he was not meant to see, made himself very agreeable and rattled on about the scenery, the people, and the gossip of the neighbourhood in a much more entertaining way than Martin Carew was capable of. Colonel Fielding and Margaret Holt brought up the rear.

During the last few days of bright warm sunshine the fresh green leaves had opened thickly on every tree, and as Mirkdale was well wooded and chiefly pasture lands, it had altogether the aspect of a beautiful cultivated park. There was a rustling wind abroad amongst the branches, which seemed to sway gaily and gladly in the sunny sweetness of the spring morning, and the occasional ring of a young laugh or voice, and the clatter of the horses' hoofs on the roads harmonised with the sounds of merry nature as they went along.

Margaret Holt was in that buoyant mood when everything beautiful or pleasant is doubly enjoyed, and Crosspatch went easily and quietly beside Colonel Fielding's horse, as if she were at one with her mistress and liked her company. Very narrow had hitherto been Margaret's acquaintance amongst gentlemen : her father, Martin Carew, and the Rector, might be said to be the only three she knew. To be sure, some few old sportsmen who admired the little girl for her cool daring riding—Sir Henry Trafford, the master of the Mirkdale Hunt, John Blounte of Riswicke, and old Paley—had always uncovered to her with as much deference as if she had been the greatest lady in the county, but Sylvan Holt gruffly responded

to their civilities himself, and marked very undisguisedly that he did not intend she should have any intimacy with anybody whatever. This rigid seclusion had strongly influenced her manner, which was very winning in its mixture of shy reserve and natural frankness—a manner such as is never seen amongst girls who, almost from their babyhood, begin to think of the world where some day, perhaps, they will be hacked about and lose all freshness of heart, mind, and feeling, before they have proved one sensation worth experiencing. Colonel Fielding, a man who had lived in the world and was one of it, found her captivating and attractive exceedingly. He liked to see the bright surprise of her eyes when he answered some of her inquisitive demands (she had undertaken to catechise him about the amusements and accomplishments of gay ladies in London), and to watch the vivid play of expression on her mobile features. Sometimes she fell silent for a quarter of a mile or so—a pretty meditative silence hers was—and then she would begin again on the same topic, which seemed suddenly invested to her fancy with greater interest than it deserved. Once her lips remained sealed rather longer than usual, so Colonel Fielding said, “I am still open to your interrogatories, Miss Holt.”

Margaret laughed; “Do you like clever women?” asked she: “women like those we have been talking about.”

“Yes, I do. Accomplishments rarely spoil women and sometimes improve them; keep them from idling and hanging about for hours without occupation. I like to see a wholesome mental activity, certainly.”

“Oh,” thought Margaret, internally, “if you only knew what an ignorant girl you are talking to!” But the Colonel did not think at all about the matter—or if he did he supposed she had been put through the usual course of book-learning like others of her age and station; the only ignorance she had betrayed was ignorance of the ways of the world, and that freshened his fancy delightfully. He had known women so long and so intimately, and had been jarred out of tune by so much paltry envy, jealousy, vanity, and pretension, that sometimes he was cynically inclined to cry out that feminine guileness in the new generation was a myth, and to see an unspoilt and beautiful embodiment of it in Margaret’s person renewed his faith.

He was not very well pleased when Bell Rowley, tired of what she irreverently styled “the little parson’s cloak,” rode

back and joined herself to them ; or when, by-and-by, the road becoming narrower, where only two could conveniently go abreast, Margaret went forward with Mr. Wilmot a little way, and then exchanged him again for Martin Carew.

Martin's first remark when she joined him was, that they were close to Deepgyll and he had not had her to himself at all : then he made her promise that she would go down to the falls with him and nobody else—a very strong emphasis on “nobody else ;” and Margaret said she would if he wished it, but if any one joined them was she to bid them “go away ?” Martin was by this time in that unhappy frame of temper when a jest appears an injury, and he replied, harshly, that she could please herself. Margaret's white brow flushed, but she made no retort, and soon began to talk as gaily as ever, while her companion's conscience pricked him severely for what he had said, but still not severely enough to make him confess it.

The nearer they approached Deepgyll the more picturesque the road became, winding through deep ferny brakes, and gradually descending until it emerged upon a bridge, below which the river foamed and boiled amongst great rocky fragments, torn, perhaps, from the precipitous walls that shut in the torrent on either hand. At one end of the bridge was a small inn, by the door of which several of the ladies had already dismounted, and were tying up their habit skirts for the greater convenience of walking through the woods. Martin got off his horse, and was going quickly round to help Margaret, when Colonel Fielding stepped forward and superseded him ; this was too much for his forbearance ; he felt so angry that he would have behaved very foolishly, and have abandoned Margaret altogether, had she not stopped his retreat by saying—

“Martin, you will come with me, won't you ? I shall want you to help me over those stones below the fall where we got across the last time we were here : to that pretty plantation—you remember it ?”

Yes, he remembered it. Colonel Fielding, however, either did not or would not see the drift of Margaret's words, and kept his place beside her with steady composure, while the whole party ate oat-cake, crisp, hot, and buttered, which Bell Rowley declared was the proper thing to do at Deepgyll ; and when they dispersed in groups through the woods, he still went with Margaret, assisting her down the steep rough places with his officious hand, while Martin Carew—his occupation

gone—followed sulkily in the rear. Perhaps Colonel Fielding had an object in it, perhaps he had none, but whenever he addressed Martin that day, he made him feel and *look* the inexperienced, raw, and—for the nonce—not too amiable strippling. Margaret's cheeks tingled with pain and vexation more than once at his curt, impatient speeches, which fell pointless on the Colonel's lofty urbanity; she was feeling, probably, that his irritable young temper did not show him to the best advantage just then.

A flight of steps cut in the rock, and overhung by slender bushes, led down to the stony margin of the river; sometimes the water flowed close under the walls, but it had already receded somewhat into the centre of its bed, leaving clear pebbly pools amongst the fallen masses that encumbered it. Looking up from the foot of the rock, there rose a great grey precipice fringed along the top with slender beech and ash trees and an undergrowth of hazel and alder bushes. In the crevices waved tufts of grass of golden rod, and ragged robin, and here and there trickled down narrow threads of water cold and clear as ice. The opposite side of the river was at this point no longer precipitous; the gentle, flower-sown glades of a young plantation sloped down to the water's edge, and by the checkered sun and shade upon the green turf, and the flittering joy of breeze and bird amongst the trees, wooed all seekers after the picturesque into their pleasant solitudes.

"There is our wood, Martin! Is it not beautiful to-day? And what a profusion of wild anemones!" cried Margaret, standing still to look across. "I am so glad we came!"

"But you cannot go over *here*?" said Colonel Fielding, pointing at the foamy currents sweeping amongst the stones.

"Oh, yes; I can easily, when we have been up to see the falls."

"Margaret Holt is not a helpless fine lady, Colonel Fielding," added Martin, with what he meant for contempt, but which was only anger.

"So I perceive. Your Mirkdale maidens are a race of Amazons," replied the Colonel, laughing: "*Amazons*, not *hoydens*, understand."

Martin muttered something about impertinence, and marched forward, leaving Margaret and Colonel Fielding to follow. For about twenty yards or more, a jutting rock hid what was before them, but on turning its flank the whole expanse of the

falls met their view—the foamy white glory arched by a shattered rainbow. The trees above dipped their branches to meet the flying showers of spray, and the sun shining on the vast volume of water as it poured from ledge to ledge sparkled as on an avalanche of diamonds. They were the last of the party to arrive, and those who had preceded them were expatiating or not, as their tastes inclined, upon the marvellous beauty of the scene. Mr. Wilmot had mounted on a low rock in the form of a table, and kept quoting fragments of poetry and exclaiming—

“Oh! glorious, very fine, indeed;” while his wife insisted upon informing him that the falls were neither so wide nor so lofty as certain Irish ones that she named. At some distance off were Mr. Barlow and Bertha Leven, and if a very blithe blushing face and merry half downcast eye are entitled to tell a tale, there was a happy little heart at Deepgyll that day. Fanny Rowley was seated silent and contemplative with her toes dangling over a pool, into which her brother Tom flung stones for the avowed purpose of splashing her habit; and Bell, somebody cried out, had been down to the falls, had pronounced them stupid, and was gone up again through the wood alone.

Martin Carew's temper was so sadly wrong now that, with a boyish perversity, he invited Fanny to accompany him lower down the river where they could cross into the plantation. Fanny accepted with glee, and when Margaret saw them set off together her colour rose violently. To her great dismay Colonel Fielding observed it.

“Our young friend looks thwarted this afternoon. Do you know what has gone amiss with him?” asked he, in a faintly sarcastic tone. “Shall we pursue him or not?”

“We are going the same way,” replied Margaret, and they followed down the river side until they reached the best place for crossing.

While Martin was dragging the slow, unwieldy Fanny from rock to rock—for she had little or no spring in her—he had the further mortification of seeing Colonel Fielding help Margaret over, and go up with her through one of the sunniest glades. True, Margaret waited, and even called to him to follow, but he feigned not to hear, and they were soon out of sight. He deserved to make posies for Fanny Rowley for an hour, which she asked him to do that she might boast of it to her sister Bell afterwards.

While everybody else was thus employed, Bell Rowley was intent on executing a private scheme of her own, which had never ceased to ferment in her mind since the day of her meeting with Margaret Holt at Oakfield, when Margaret had said that no one could mount her mare Crosspatch but herself. This remark Bell received in the light of a defiance or challenge, and watching her opportunity she stole away to the inn to make secret trial of her skill. There was nobody visible but James Groves, who was sitting on a bench outside the door reading an old newspaper, so to him she addressed herself, desiring him to bring out Miss Holt's mare as she wanted to ride it. James grinned respectfully, but declined compliance, and Bell who, when her fancy was crossed, was not choice in her manner of speaking to inferiors, demanded insolently who *he* was that dared to disobey *her*?

"I'se Mrs. Joan Clervaux's servant, down at Oakfield," replied James, sturdily, "and I'se under Mr. Carew's orders to-day; he warned me to be special careful of Crosspatch."

"Oh! I'll answer to your master and mistress too,—just bring her out," persisted Bell, trying a wheedling tone.

"No, miss, it won't do, nohow. Can't disobey orders; an' besides, ma'am, you'd paril your neck," replied the uncomplimentary James.

Bell said he was a most impertinent person, and she should certainly inform his mistress; but the staunch old servant was unmoved by the threat, and to prevent mischief he walked off to the stable, locked the door, and carried away the key.

Bell chafed fiercely at her disappointment, and continued to hang about the house until she saw James go down the road to the falls, when she went boldly into the inn and knocked at the parlour door, through the upper half of which, it being glass, she saw the landlord taking his siesta. The man roused himself and came out, on which Bell said she wanted her horse—she would go to the stable and show him which it was, as the grooms were all out of the way. Not suspecting any trick, the man led the way, growled at finding the door locked, but fetched a second key from the house, and in a few minutes Bell had the proud delight of seeing Crosspatch led up to the stone steps by the wall.

The sagacious creature had allowed herself to be brought out quietly enough, but as soon as she saw Bell and heard her voice, she began to show her temper by running backwards,

dancing sideways, and jerking her head round impatiently, but these pranks only whetted Bell's thirst for conquest. The man commented on the animal's shyness of her mistress, as he supposed Bell to be, but she explained the mare's reluctance to let herself be mounted by saying, that he—the landlord—was strange to her, and that she did not like strangers. With the greatest difficulty she was at last brought to a stand by the steps, Bell sprang into the saddle instantly, grasped the bridle, and the man loosed the mare's head. As soon as she felt herself comparatively at liberty, she gave a bound forward which almost unseated Bell, but not failing in nerve, the girl contrived to hold her well in hand until they came to a smooth stretch of the turf by the wayside, when she gave her a good breathing gallop.

This might have contented her, but Bell could not think her triumph complete until she had exhibited herself before Margaret, so she turned into the wood and rode down the narrow pathway towards the falls. This pathway had never been intended for other than travellers on foot; in many places it neared the edge of the precipice, which was everywhere more or less concealed by the undergrowth of ferns and bushes. Crosspatch was very fidgetty and uneasy, but Bell, who was glorifying herself in imagination on the sublime crisis when she should thus appear before Margaret Holt, paid no heed to this monitory chafing; she was holding the bridle carelessly, when all at once a bird flew out of a bush close before them; the mare shyed, Bell pulled sharply and angrily, and used her whip. Crosspatch ran backwards, reared straight up, came down clattering on her fore-feet, but still without unseating Bell, reared again and again, quite unconsciously trampling towards the edge of the abyss. Suddenly the rash girl became aware of her peril, and she had but time to fling herself clear of the saddle when the poor beast's hind legs slipped over the precipice, and after an instant's frantic but ineffectual struggle to recover herself, she crashed down on the rocks below.

Bell, with no more serious hurt than a few disfiguring scratches on her face, hastily rose and stood aghast, livid, trembling, with her eyes upon the torn mould where the mare had striven to regain her footing. Just at that moment James Groves came leisurely across from another part of the wood, whistling cheerfully as he fingered the stable-door key in his

pocket, and thought how lucky it was he had been present to refuse Bell Rowley's demand. But as he drew near and saw her pallid, scared visage, the broken plants and ground cut up with the mare's feet, what had happened flashed instantaneously into his mind.

Bell burst out into a confused explanation, in which her own imminent danger and wonderful escape figured most largely, but James cut her short.

"Miss Margaret's mare has fallen down here!" screamed he savagely, while his fat face grew crimson with rage and grief: "Oh, Lord, didn't I tell you, you couldn't and shouldn't ride her?" He shook a furious fist in Bell's face, and adding that she deserved tying up by the thumbs, set off as fast as he could run to the steps. Bell followed, miserably crestfallen and remorseful: if it had been anything but a horse she would not have cared so much, she thought; what would people say! She who had always counted herself the best rider in Mirkdale to have brought any horse there!—so stupid! so mortifying!

By this time all the party had left the falls except Mr. Wilmot, and when Crosspatch fell over the precipice he was not twenty yards off. He was standing beside her as James came scrambling over the rocks, and said very quietly as he came up:—

"She'll have to be shot."

The poor creature lay on her side, not struggling, but quivering all over, and making a screaming, panting noise. James began to cry, and Bell approaching asked with a guilty face:—

"Is she much hurt, Mr. Wilmot?"

"Hurt? she'll have to be killed; her back's broke!" blubbered the groom; "Oh, what'll Miss Marg'ret say? She did love her mare, she did."

"Killed!" repeated Bell in dismay. "Oh, surely you won't need to do that, will you?"

"The sooner the poor creature is put out of her misery the better," replied the Rector sternly. "You have been very culpable, young lady, and have destroyed a most valuable animal, not to mention its being so great a favourite."

"I wish it had been myself instead," cried Bell, with a spasm of well-earned wretchedness, for just at that instant Margaret Holt's merry voice and laugh were heard, and she, Colonel Fielding, Martin Carew, and Fanny, appeared round the jutting rock.

"What has happened?" cried Margaret, for everybody immediately looked at her. She ran forward, and James, who was by the mare's head, stood aside sobbing and crying like a schoolboy. Margaret did not speak, but knelt down as the poor beast, at the sound of her voice, turned its filmy eye towards her. Bell began a vociferous self-exculpation until Colonel Fielding frowned her into silence, and she got out of sight to hide her shame and mortification. Margaret stroked her favourite's glossy neck for a moment or two, and then looked up at those around with eyes darkened by suppressed tears. She tried to ask if anything could be done, but broke down in a passion of childish sobs and laid her face on the poor mare's neck. Colonel Fielding answered her distinctly that its life could not be saved, while Martin Carew stood by with that straitened feeling at the heart which in men answers for tears. He begged Margaret to come away, but she refused, and when the Rector returned from the inn whither he had gone to borrow a gun, she stretched out her hands over the animal as if to keep everybody from approaching. Colonel Fielding therefore took hold of her and raised her from the ground with gentle authority, saying at the same moment with great feeling—

"It must be done, my dear child."

She did not resist, but stood shivering and clinging to his arm, while the Rector gave James the gun to load; she was observant of all that passed, for checking her sobs she said to Martin Carew—

"You do it then, Martin, the man's hand shakes so." As Martin obeyed and took the gun into his hands she averted her face for a moment; there was a sharp crack, a ringing reverberation amongst the rocks, and poor Crosspatch lay dead. Margaret could not restrain a cry at her favourite's death-note; and quitting her grasp of the Colonel's arm, she rushed forward and bent over it again.

"Ah," said the Rector, twinkling his eyes, "one must know the sort of life that poor girl leads to understand her passionate fondness for an animal."

Colonel Fielding replied, "Indeed?" as if he would have liked to hear more; but the Rector suggesting that it would be well to take Margaret away as quickly as possible, he approached, and in the same tone that had influenced her before, begged her to leave the place. She rose unassisted, and saying to Martin Carew—"I should like to have her buried at

Wildwood," started away at a swift pace up into the woods, never looking back, and crying bitterly all the way as she went. With the exception of Martin, nobody there had ever known or cared much for her before, yet every one now respected and sympathised in her childish expressed sorrow; Fanny Rowley cried almost as bitterly as herself.

Ah! how grieved, how remorseful Martin felt that he had spent his vexed feelings in wounding her already that day; he was ashamed to follow her and talk to her as he would have done but for those foolish moments of jealous temper, and she did not seem to expect he should: indeed Margaret was more hurt by his frivolous neglect than she would have been by hard words from others, neither was she one easily to forget the sting he had given her—coming at this time too it seemed doubly keen. But Colonel Fielding had no such restraint upon him, and overtaking her, presently he offered his arm to her in mounting the steep pathways. She, at first, glanced round mechanically for Martin, but he was a long way behind enduring his fit of repentance, so she began to ease her heart by pouring forth to the Colonel a host of trivial recollections of the unfortunate mare, ending almost every one with, "Oh! you don't know how fond I was of her!" or, "She liked me better than any one, she was always tractable with me."

Margaret had no more reticence than a child, and the Colonel listened to her with as grave and feeling an interest as he would have accorded to one. Her affections and her emotions were strong, and nothing had taught her yet either to conceal or be ashamed of them. This death of poor Crosspatch was her first bitter grief of separation from anything beloved, and for the time she felt literally to loathe and hate its cause. When Bell Rowley came up to her soon after, and attempted to renew her excuses, Margaret turned from her with indignation, and exclaimed, "Don't dare to speak to me!" Colonel Fielding looked down with surprise at her blazing glance and passion-quivering lip, and thought in his own mind that, spite of these floods of tears and childish reminiscences, it was no weak, milky nature that could give such force of expression to dislike and scorn. Bell was thoroughly abashed, and did not venture to intrude herself again.

On reaching the inn, there was a difficulty about procuring a horse for Margaret to return home. The only expedient that could be devised was to put her saddle on Colonel Fielding's,

and that he should walk; the proposition came from himself, and was obliged to be accepted, as neither the pony that James Groves rode nor Martin Carew's horse had ever carried a lady. The rest of the party therefore started at their own speed, and Margaret and Martin kept pace with the Colonel, who made light of his ten miles' walk, and seemed to like his post at the young girl's bridle: for he persuaded her that for a time at least it would be well for him to lead the animal that was strange to her and had a wilful temper on occasion. Their progress was necessarily slow, but James had been sent forward to quell his mistress's anxiety at their non-appearance earlier, so they did not hasten, and the two hours and a half that were spent on the road served to make them all three better acquainted with each other and *themselves*. Martin Carew alone was restless; he did not like the appearance of understanding that was growing up between his favourite and that grand-visaged Colonel, who looked so tenderly after his charge, that she could not but feel grateful to him. They talked together, not always including him in their conversation, and often he could not hear what either said; then the foul fiend Jealousy bit her cruel fangs deeper into his heart, and his young blood mounted hotly to his brow.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux came a mile along the road to meet them, Oscar following her. The dog sprang up joyfully to his young mistress, and then ran round the strange horse she rode, barking interrogatively as if he would ask what was become of his friend Crosspatch. So Margaret understood him, at least, and said with a quivering voice, while tears brimmed her eyes, "She won't come home any more, Oscar;" then she would have told her good friend what had happened, but sobs impeded the utterance, and Mrs. Joan bade her hush.

"Don't break your heart, love, with talking about the poor creature: I have heard all from James Groves, and I think, as he does, that Bell Rowley deserves whipping;" and with this the painful theme was set aside.

When they reached Oakfield Mrs. Joan said—

"You will come in and dine with us, Colonel Fielding, will you not? You will be too late at Bransby Park." He seemed glad, even eager, to accept the invitation, and they all entered the house together.

While Margaret Holt was absent taking off her habit, there were some comments made on Miss Bell Rowley's character

and conduct such as she would not have liked to hear; though, perhaps, they might have done her good, and have prevented her dilating so much on her deliverance from danger which her own preposterous vanity had incurred. But when Margaret reappeared the conversation changed immediately, and Colonel Fielding began to inquire of Martin when his regiment sailed, and to talk on those professional topics which are always interesting to soldiers, whether they be only at the outstart of their career, far advanced in it, or nearing its close. Martin was obliged to leave off tilting with his windmill and converse with this man, whom he was disposed to regard as his mortal foe, lest his Aunt Joan should discover his enmity, but he did it with an ill-grace enough. Colonel Fielding had been in India several years himself; there he had won his captaincy and majority very early, and had been what is commonly called a most successful and fortunate man, for he had neither powerful patronage nor much money to back him, and yet he was colonel in command of a regiment at thirty-two. He was an excellent officer, and personally brave as a lion—rashly brave, venturesome, his detractors said, being able to say nothing worse: but it was a fault on the right side, and one which the world in general inclines rather to praise than blame.

Margaret was extremely quiet and silent, but no one attempted to make her talk, though she listened attentively to all that passed. Her face showed traces of tears in its pallor, but hers was not a countenance that grief spoilt; for her pure and noble type of beauty rose superior to the loss of brilliant colour and the quenched brightness of youthful glances. There was a slight fold between her brows, and her lips were compressed; but her softened, plaintive eyes were full of feminine grace and sweetness inexpressibly winning and lovely. Martin Carew watched her furtively, sometimes answering Colonel Fielding at strange cross purposes, and betraying his feelings very palpably to that acute observer. The Colonel had penetrated Margaret's sentiments too, and could afford a little compassion to the love-sick lad who was a brother and nothing more to his first divinity. Perhaps his own youth had passed through a like fiery discipline, but if so, the man was none the worse for it now, as Martin Carew would be none the worse for it at thirty-two, if he could but have known it.

Colonel Fielding left early, and his departure was an im-

mense relief to Martin Carew. Mrs. Joan, however, began to speak of him in terms of high favour, and to say how glad she was to have renewed his acquaintance; but Martin found occasion soon after to remark that Colonel Fielding seemed to him a man of a proud, stern character, under all his gentle courtesy of manner—a remark so near the truth of what had impressed itself both on Mrs. Joan and Margaret that neither attempted to speak in mitigation of it, though a faint blush dawned on Margaret's cheek as she thought to herself that it was often these strong characters—such as her father's—whose tenderness was the deepest and most faithful where it was once bestowed.

She was neither of an age nor a temperament to indulge in morbid self-anatomy, yet a vague consciousness of some new impulse began from this time to stir in the soul of her. Whence it came and whither it tended she never thought or cared to think. It was but a faint dawn-gleam trembling on the distant hills of life, not daring yet to pierce its holy hollows or dark caves, which love or pain or passion might some day lighten up with wild electric fires—for her nature was ardent, quick, strong, vital, impetuous as his whose blood ran in her veins. The only thought it suggested was a longing to be more like other women—more accomplished, more cultivated; Mrs. Joan, while profoundly in the dark as to its cause, hailed the result gladly when she began to perceive it, and only wished that the necessity had struck her young favourite earlier—but, as she cheerfully told her, it was better late than never, and Margaret said she would begin to try to improve herself, though these tardy beginnings are always difficult. 4

CHAPTER XIV.

AT OAKFIELD.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Margaret breakfasted the next morning without Martin Carew; he had gone up to Wildwood very early, Margaret knew on what mission. Soon afterwards she and Oscar set off to the Grange together and arrived just in

time to see the last sod laid on Crosspatch's grave. It was made near the wood-side, and Martin was busy cutting the mare's name on the bole of a tree that overshadowed the spot, when Margaret appeared. He asked her if she liked his choice of place, and she said "Yes," and thanked him. Anty and Tom shouldered their spades and marched off in respectful silence, but Jacky, as soon as she descried her young mistress, came hurrying towards her, pouring forth volleys of wrathful denunciation against Bell Rowley: the old woman declared she would have the law of her if the mare had been hers, and promised that she would not let master rest when he came home until he saw about it. This mention of "master" suggested an inquiry whether Margaret had yet received any letter from her father. She had not, but as Tibbie Ryder came to Oakfield each morning, she supposed that if there had been anything for her the post-mistress would have brought it.

"I'd no' trust her to 'liver up our letters if they're no asked for," said Jacky suspiciously; "master's been gane now one, two, three days—to-morrow's Sunday an' there's no post. I'd ha' you go down to Tibbie yourself, Margaret, an' see."

Accordingly Margaret and Martin bent their steps thitherwards. Both were silent until they reached Wildfoot and came into the wood, then Martin took courage and said abruptly—

"I was in a horrible temper yesterday, Margaret, can you forgive me?"

"Yes, I can forgive you, but you were very cross: what ailed you?" asked she, softening towards him for what he had just been doing.

"I wanted your company to myself, there was nobody else I care for, and I could not have you a single moment. Do you know, Margaret, I should like you to prefer me before all the world!" The last sentence came out in a rushing whisper, as if Martin were afraid of the sound of his own voice or else of his hazardous words, and his heart beat very thick after he had uttered it.

"And who is there in the world that I should prefer before you, Martin, except my father and Mrs. Joan?" replied Margaret, looking at him reproachfully, with eyes pale from yesterday's tears; "if you were really my own brother I could not love you better."

"Well, I suppose not," said Martin, gulping down a host of

passionate phrases which nearly choked him, and trying to feel heroic in his disappointment, for he did think she would have understood him then. He tried to persuade himself that he would rather she had laughed at him or been angry than that she should have made that simple, open declaration of attachment which was like an extinguisher over the candle of his hopes. But the flames of twenty are soon rekindled; one tiny spark is blown up into a volcano at white heat by a faint gust from the lips of self-delusion. Martin hoped and despaired and hoped again ten times a day. He thought if he only might speak openly he should win his cause; but no, the tide had gone back from him—he had missed the turn, and what he wished with all the ardour of his youth was become amongst the things that might have been, but never were. He fell silent until they issued out into Beckford Lane, when he began to talk rather fast and incoherently of his approaching departure.

"Tell me, Martin, why you were so unkind yesterday?" Margaret interrupted him to ask: "had I done anything to vex you?"

"No, but I was a jealous fool, that was all." Martin felt a masculine satisfaction in thus humbling himself at a question that seemed to portend well to him; "I did not like to yield you up to Colonel Fielding, and I thought him very intrusive; he might have taken Bell or Fanny Rowley for his companion."

There was no answer from Margaret, merely a shy turning away of her face, and a moment's stoppage to gather a cluster of blue forget-me-nots that peeped out of the stony watercourse by the wayside.

"However," Martin went on, "I shall keep you to myself now; I dare say he has left Bransby this morning, as he only came for three days. What did you find so pleasant in his conversation, Margaret? he is very grave."

Margaret said she did not know, and began to walk a little faster; then suddenly changing the theme, she regretted not having brought a slip of the rose-tree that they were to plant by the Grange porch, and bade Martin remember it the next time they came up.

The walk to the post-office at Beckford was unproductive; there was no letter from Sylvan Holt to his daughter, and she and Martin returned home to find Sir Thomas Rowley and Colonel Fielding had called at Oakfield in their absence. Sir Thomas had come to express regret at his daughter's repreh-

sible conduct, and to offer compensation for the loss of the mare; but Mrs. Joan Clervaux begged to refer him to Sylvan Holt on his return to Wildwood, saying that neither she nor Margaret could act independently in the matter.

"I knew the poor mare had more than money's worth to you, Gipsy," the old lady added considerably, "and I was glad you were out to escape Sir Thomas's awkward apologies. Colonel Fielding inquired about you most kindly, and left his farewell compliments."

Margaret stooped down to pat Oscar and pinch his velvety ears. She was both glad and sorry; it was a boon to have escaped Sir Thomas, but she would rather not have missed Colonel Fielding. Martin asked if he was leaving Bransby Park that day.

"Yes, he will be half-way to Middlemoor by this time," replied Mrs. Joan; "he is going into Scotland to stay with his own people some time."

No one expressed regret, or asked any further question; only Oscar had the benefit of Margaret's caresses a few moments longer, and Martin Carew recovered his wonted vivacity and good-humour. Colonel Fielding's departure eased his mind of a mighty burden. Mrs. Joan then began to speak of a pleasure she should soon have in seeing his mother, her former friend, who was coming to pay a long-promised visit at Bransby Park. Margaret, who seemed to have taken a silent fit, woke up suddenly as to a theme of intense interest, and asked question after question concerning her; but Mrs. Joan's recollections went little further than to convey that in her youth she had been gay and graceful and a celebrated beauty. Whether she was proud or the reverse, kind or unamiable, clever or dull, she did not mention; but Margaret deduced that she must be good from Mrs. Joan's desiring to meet her again.

CHAPTER XV.

MARTIN'S LAST WEEK AT HOME.

THE next day, Sunday, there were walks to and from Beckford Church in the morning and afternoon, and in the evening—

deliciously warm and balmy it was—Martin and Gipsy had a long, dangerous stroll under the trees of the shrubbery, and became perfect friends again. But that night, when Margaret had retired, Mrs. Joan Clervaux took her nephew to task, and herself a little also, about the critical position he was working himself into with his eyes wide open.

“There must be no engagement, Martin,” said the old lady with great solemnity. She never doubted but that Margaret would be his if he asked her; but Martin rather bitterly replied that he had no encouragement to make one; Margaret cared nothing about him. In fact, though amity was restored, she had not raised his expectations in the least; she had been very open and kind, but had talked chiefly of poor Crosspatch, and Martin did not relish any allusions to the day at Deepgyll; he would have been glad for every reason to blot it out from the record of the days that had been.

A brief sketch in outline must carry us through the last week of his stay at Oakfield.

On Monday morning early they walked up to the Grange to see Jacky and plant the red rose by the porch, and returned home through Wildwood, where they loitered so long that they were late for dinner, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux sat in great fear and perturbation of mind, sorely distrustful of Martin's reticence: but her feelings were restored to calm when they re-appeared laughing at some small mischance, and in the utmost good-humour. In the afternoon Lady Rowley and Bell drove over from Bransby for a formal peace-making, and Margaret, who had been previously prepared for the visitation by a lecture from Mrs. Joan on the Christian duty of forgiveness, tried not to look fierce at the now humbly repentant Bell, and conversed with her about the studies that girls work at with their governesses. Bell, being on her good behaviour, gave information to the best of her ability. In the evening, Margaret investigated the Oakfield bookshelves in search of Bruce's Geography and Mrs. Mangnall's Questions, but found neither, and was much rallied by Martin Carew on her sudden thirst for useful knowledge. She went to bed in a doubtful frame of mind, and dreamt that she was standing barefoot on the lawn, with a croquet mallet in her hand and a wreath of asses' ears on her head, while Bell Rowley, Colonel Fielding and Martin Carew pelted her with quarto volumes, which turned into ugly toadstools and fungi as they fell about her.

The next day, Tuesday, Martin and Margaret paid a second visit to Tibbie Ryder to ask for letters. There was one from Sylvan Holt, brief and business-like without a trace of emotion. He said he could not return to the Grange until the following week, as he had certain affairs which he desired to settle in London, but that he would write again. Margaret did not waste herself in speculations as to what these affairs might be, as he had promised her full explanation when he came back, but much cheered by the tone of his letter, she recovered all her natural verve and gaiety. Her father was well, and apparently in his hard grave mood, so she rested in the hope that he was quite himself again, and gave up her anxiety; until it came, she had scarcely dared to acknowledge how strong an under current of fear for him had been marring much of her enjoyment at Oakfield; now she could give herself up to being happy without self-reproach intruding to quench every smile and hush every laugh. The afternoon was spent by her in writing a long, long letter back—the first she had ever had occasion to address to her father, containing minute details of all she had seen and done since he left her, omitting only the incident of the portrait taken out of the closet in his room by Jacky. In the evening she and Martin strolled up to Wildwood to tell the servant what news; as they returned Martin relapsed into a jealous mood from some careless observation of his companion, and began to dwell dismally on his long expatriation, for which folly she gave him a sensible rebuke that restored him to his senses.

On Wednesday, immediately after breakfast, Martin rode away to Walham Castle, where he was to spend two days in his uncle's family. As soon as he was gone, Margaret resumed her examination of the bookshelves, and after diligent search discovered several ancient school-tomes inscribed with Mrs. Joan Clervaux's name. The old lady commended her, and promised her some new books if she proved herself in earnest; so Margaret worked for a couple of hours, not breaking off more than once in every ten minutes to ask Oscar if she was not very industrious, and to caress his handsome head, which he leant confidently against her knee. This earned her a holiday, and as Mrs. Joan was going to make a houserow visitation of her poor pensioners and cottage folk, Margaret betook herself to a long ramble on the moor with her dog.

On Thursday morning, Mrs. Joan Clervaux being engaged

with Robbie Clarke on divers matters of business, Margaret diverted herself with reading, drawing, and talking confidentially to Oscar. In the afternoon the two ladies, with the staghound for cavalier, took a vigorous constitutional, which was lightened with reminiscences of Geraldine Favel. In the evening Margaret sewed a little, and wished a great deal for Martin Carew home again.

On Friday morning he came to breakfast, having ridden from Walham since seven o'clock, to lose as little of the day as possible. Robbie Clarke having still business that engaged Mrs. Joan, they were left very much to themselves. Occasionally a moody moment overcame Martin, but he tried to put it off and be as gay and blithe as Margaret seemed. She said, "Let us be merry while we may," and would not gloom at all.

They were very erratic that morning. They first wandered up to the Grange to see Jacky, who had completed her cleaning operations; then they visited a certain favourite den in the moor, where the young ferns made a plummy green oasis amidst a dusky sea; next they struck deep into the heart of Wildwood, where the sunshine came as dimly through thick branches as it comes through cathedral windows, for they must needs visit together once more before this long farewell every dear old haunt of their childhood. Dinner time was forgotten, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux sitting at home, alone and unthought of, tried to say calmly, "Youth must pass," and not to feel anxious more than was in reason. Just as tea was brought in they returned, weary but cheerful, and neither of them burdened with any fresh confidence to pour into her faithful bosom.

On Saturday everybody began to feel that this was the last day but one, and everybody was more than usually thoughtful for Martin, while Martin was more than usually thoughtful for everybody. Margaret spent the morning in making a queer little housewife of red silk, which she stocked with needles, pins, threads, buttons and tapes; when finished it was dropped into one corner of Martin's portmanteau, and was more sacred to him than ever was relic of saint or martyr to holy devotee; it is not on record that he put its contents to their earthly purpose: no! in his eyes the threads and needles, the buttons and pins were things glorified—set apart from common use for ever. It was a long day, for no one settled to any regular employment, and there was less talk and more thought in the twilight than there had been for many twilights before. Margaret's

great gaiety had given way at last, and she was very hushed; her good-night was only a whisper. After it Martin went out into the shrubbery, and smoked his unwholesome cigar in a peevish melancholy mood. Mrs. Joan watched him from her window until he came in, not quite at peace in her own mind, and perhaps wishing that to-morrow with its softened feelings were over. None of the three slept very peacefully, and the sun rose on that to-morrow, waking them up to the actual presence of that most dreary time, "the last day together."

And "our last day together" was the idea that filled the mind of each of the small party that assembled in the Oakfield bookroom for breakfast that Sunday morning, though no one made open allusion to it. There was not any strain to be cheerful, yet as little was there depression. The dreariness of parting lies more with those who stay than those who go, and Martin, in his young elastic spirit, experienced a certain restrained eagerness which dulled the pain for him, if pain there were. He probably felt more at leaving Margaret than at leaving Mrs. Joan—mother as she had been to him in all but name—but even leaving Margaret had its background of hopeful promise, its future of noble endeavour.

It was the first Sunday in the month, when the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was regularly administered at Beckford Church, and Mrs. Joan desired that they should partake of it together lest such an opportunity should never recur again for them. And the day passed, as every day passes, be it day of waiting or day of work, and the solemn evening came. All the time of Martin's stay at Oakfield the weather had been calm, sunshiny, and pleasant, but this evening surpassed all previous ones in its soft blue stillness. Not till summer warms into lustrous August or golden-grained September, do the Mirkdale skies put on their imperial sunset robes, or the moors burnish to a rich glow of royal purple. In spring the clouds are tender grey, the sun fades down beyond Fernbro' without gilding its broad flank, and the pale twilight melts imperceptibly into night.

For an hour after tea Mrs. Joan paced the terrace in front of the house leaning on her nephew's arm. Margaret would have left them, but the old lady bade her remain, saying:

"We are all friends here, Gipsy, there are no secrets."

In that hour were uttered the gentle cautions—potent fruits of grey experience—which age may offer to youth; and the

venturesome, high dreams which youth will tell to loving age. Words of encouragement, words of gratitude and faithfulness were freely exchanged, pleasant words to remember on either side if, in those long uncertain years of separation, Death should forbid each evermore to behold the other with the eyes of the flesh. Margaret walked a little apart, silent, sad, and very sorry to lose her companion—her almost brother. When the dews began to fall, Mrs. Joan would go in-doors, but Martin said, "Let *us* stay awhile longer, Margaret," and so they strayed into the shrubby walk, where the chestnut blossoms had powdered the earth as with a light fall of snow. There was a great twittering of birds, and a *whushing* wind amongst the upper branches that filled the air with music. Margaret liked that whushing mood of the Mirkdale woods; it sounded soft yet hurried, as if its wings were freighted with a happiness that could not rest in silence, but must utter itself in gentle voices.

"Well, Margaret, this is our last evening together," said Martin, giving words to the uppermost thought in both their minds.

"Yes; Martin, I don't like these partings—I cannot get a distinct view of when or where we two may meet again," said she, suddenly.

"You have been thinking about that? But you love me, Margaret?" said he, with suppressed vehemence—it was the last chance.

"Yes, I do love you dearly, brother mine!" she replied, with infinite sweetness, and a frank fearless gaze into his flushed countenance.

He put a great constraint on himself, and they took several turns in silence, while the birds went on twittering, and the wind breathing its calm chant of content and peacefulness.

"I wish we could see something of what is to happen in these absent years, Martin," were Margaret's next words.

"I thought I was to find all just the same as I leave it, and that you were to ring Beckford church bells for my coming home," replied Martin, bitterly. "Have you begun to prewise changes that are to make Mirkdale a strange place to me?"

"Nay, I cannot tell."

Margaret could have told, if she had so willed. She could have told that since he came to Oakfield and she had met him—a child in all that makes the child—a new interest had be-

gun insidiously to wind itself into her life, and to develop in her the sweet feelings of maidenhood ; she could have told that swift coming events were already casting their shadows before upon her path, and that these years of absence looked no more a mere passage way to the great event of his return, but the mysterious, still dark, arena wherein was to be enacted her own immediate drama of life : but she twice repeated that vague "I cannot tell," then sighed and gazed up into Heaven, where the stars were beginning to peep ; so there fell another silence, for Martin need no longer argue down his heart with prudential maxims or chilling doubts—he saw the truth, or thought he did, and knew his fate was fixed. The twilight grew deeper every moment, the bird-song fainter, until at last Mrs. Joan's voice was heard saying from the window :

"Come in now, children ; remember, it is our last night together."

Margaret left them early on purpose, and then the aunt and nephew had a long open-heart talk by the fireside ; she was their last theme.

"Margaret does not love me, never will love me," said Martin, "so I have held my peace ; she knows nothing."

● "That is right, my brave good boy ; right not to disturb her mind ; you would not have needed words to tell you if it had been otherwise. Gipsy is very affectionate and very frank ; she would have no idea of playing with you."

"I see that, and it leaves me no loophole for a glimmer of hope. We are brother and sister—but it is a disappointment, Aunt Joan, and a cruel one. I have loved her ever since I was a lad."

"You are none the worse for that, Martin ; she is worth it. I may wish it had been otherwise, but as it is, be a man."

Martin had his head down, and his fingers clenched in his hair ; Mrs. Joan did not see his face for several minutes, and when he raised it, at last, it was only to say :

"I am glad I did not tell her ; it would have done no good ; Let us get to bed, aunt."

CHAPTER XVI.

GOOD-BYE.

"TEN minutes to three," said Margaret looking at her watch, "no use to go to bed again. I might sleep too long and miss him. Dear Martin!"

She drew the curtains quietly aside, and let in the wan grey dawn. Distinct lay the hills, the moors, the lonely farmsteads: distinct sounded the rush of Blackbeck, distinct the first waking notes in the old trees of the shrubbery. But there was not a sigh of wind; nature seemed oppressed or languid, and the pale eye of day opened heavily. Martin was to set out on his journey at five o'clock; he and Margaret had bade each other good-bye over night, but she had promised him she would be up to see him set off. When dressed, she sat by the window in a thoughtful though not melancholy mood; yet, ever and anon, her throat swelled and tears rose in her eyes. Young hearts grow tender over these partings, but let them take their blessed privilege of looking forward and be thankful; *that* is a consolation that the old dare scarcely claim for theirs.

By and by, there began a stir in the house—everybody awake, yet everybody going softly. Servants hurrying through their work of regular brushing and dusting, that their young master might see no difference from ordinary mornings.

Then there was the clink of breakfast-things being carried into the pleasant little bookroom, and soon after Mrs. Joan and Martin went down stairs together. Margaret would not follow immediately, but watched the gardener early at his work in the avenue, and Robbie Clarke coming across to talk to him about mistress's nephew going away—as the Beckford oracle declared—to the dreadfulest of strange lands, where the men were savages, and snakes and tigers were as plentiful as bumblekites in Mirkdale hedges. The domestic women-folk, whom Robbie Clarke had thus instructed, regarded Martin with reverent awe, and speculated wildly on his chances of escape from such manifold dangers; they hoped mistress did not know of them, for as he was bound to go and fight his country's battles whether she would or no, it was as well she should

not harass her mind with his risks. He must take his chance with the rest, Robbie told them, but they'd all be proud of him yet; and many a coarse yet kindly face watched at door and window, that early May morning, to give him a homely, hearty word as he rode away.

When Margaret joined them, Mrs. Joan was standing with her two hands resting on Martin's shoulders speaking to him quite cheerfully. The lad himself kept his face turned aside to the window for a moment or two, and then they all sat down to breakfast, Mrs. Joan still supporting the conversation, and determined to send her dear nephew away in good heart, if it depended on her courageous self-control. The meal was soon over, and then all the household came in to prayers, which Mrs. Joan read, perhaps with longer pauses than usual, but still without faltering. After this Martin shook hands with the servants all round, thanked them for their blunt good wishes and predictions, and then said very quietly—

“Well, I must go now.”

Margaret and Mrs. Joan saw James bringing his horse round to the door, and did not delay their parting, which was even less painful now taken “sune than syne.” “God bless you, my boy! God bless and keep you!” and “Good-bye, dear Martin,” said the women; then a kiss, a long long strain of the hand, a hasty pulling down of his cap over his eyes, and Martin ran out.

“I'll write before we sail, Aunt Joan!” cried he, plucking up a spirit as he mounted his horse, for till now he had been almost tongue-tied. “Mind you write too, Margaret! That will do, James! Good-bye, aunt; good-bye, Gipsy; good-bye all;” and, with a wave of his cap and a sudden flush over his face, he trotted out at the gate, while those two, bravely swallowing their tears that he might not be damped, watched him out of sight. Now that he was gone they could turn in-doors, and weep and comfort each other as tender-hearted women will: perhaps Martin Carew himself, as he rode under the dewy trees alone on his journey, felt not all his boyhood past, and did not see either earth or heaven very clearly for some little way.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIRESIDE STORIES.

THREE days after Martin Carew's departure from Oakfield, Margaret received a second letter from her father, which had been so long delayed upon its road, or else by Tibbie Ryder at the post-office, that she found he would arrive the same night. It was necessary that she should go home at once, to be ready to receive him on his return to the Grange, and also to send off Anty immediately to Middlemoor with Faustus: she therefore bade Mrs. Joan Clervaux a hurried good-bye, and set off with Oscar to walk home.

Jacky was in all the throng of churning the week's butter when she reached the house, but she received Margaret's news with satisfaction.

"Master 'll be home to-night!" cried she, pleasantly; "well, indeed, I'll be fain to see him back, an' you too, bairn; t'auld house isn't like itsel' when either of you's awa. An' ha' you had a good time down at Oakfield?"

"Yes, Jacky, very; but I'll tell you about that by and by. Where is Anty?"

"Happen you'll find him i' t' fauld yard; but if he's no' there he'll be in to his dinner enow."

Margaret would not wait for the man's appearance, but sought him round the farm until he was found, when she hastened him off to Middlemoor, lest her father should arrive at the Inn and find no horse waiting for him to ride home. Then she returned in-doors and put off her hat in the summer parlour, while Oscar, with a vast sigh of content at finding himself in his old quarters, stretched his great frame across the broad sunny bar that poured through the open window upon the faded floor. How blank, how empty, the room looked after gay, lightsome Oakfield! The basket of flowers showed like a speck of brilliant life in a desert, and for a minute or two Margaret felt as if something greatly lacked in the hollow sounding house; but for a minute or two only. Turning her gaze outwards, there lay before her that glorious picture which had made her mind instinct with beauty—bonnie Mirkdale, in

all the lustrous richness of early summer. Oakfield could not match that. A gravelled terrace, a velvet lawn, a screen of trees and shrubs, were soon learnt by heart, but this view was ever fresh, ever changing, as the sky, or the wind, or the weather, changed.

"It is pleasant to be home again, Oscar, after all," said she, aloud; "eh, boy, don't you think so?"

Oscar turned a sleepy eye upon her for an instant, as if remonstrating with her for breaking his nap with so unnecessary a question; but she wanted something to talk to, and flapping her hat in his face, bade him get up for a lazy, good-for-nothing brave old dog. Oscar, however, was not old; he was only a whelp yet, and perhaps he resented the accusation of antiquity: at all events, he did not quit his sunny lair for his mistress's side as she bade him; he only stretched out his immense legs and laid his head down for another comfortable snooze. Margaret, therefore, finding he would not come to her, came to him, and sitting down on the floor told him a variety of little secrets of no general interest, but which he probably appreciated as highly as they deserved.

"There is somebody missing we shall never see again, unless there be a paradise of dogs and horses, Oscar," said she, tweaking one of his sleek ears by way of fixing his attention. "Poor Crosspatch, boy!" At the familiar name the beast lifted his head suddenly, looked to the door, listened, then dropped his muzzle upon his outstretched paws, whining disconsolately. Margaret patted him, sat still and silent a little longer; and then with a sigh and a rather unchristian ejaculation touching Miss Bell Rowley, betook herself to her room up-stairs. Jacky presently found her out there, and came in to see what she was doing; she soon spied, or fancied she spied, a shadow of discontent on her fair young mistress's face, and being ever jealous lest she should grow to love any place better than the Grange, she tried to probe the secret of it by shrewd questions.

"He was a brave lad, yon Martin Carew. I aye like to see a soldier—Philip Langland, he was a soldier. You and Mistress Joan Clervaux 'ud ha' a sad miss of him after he was gone?" said she, interrogatively.

"Yes," returned Margaret with an air of abstraction. Jacky took nothing by her insidious move.

"That strange gentleman, Colonel Fielding I heard Anty ca' him—is he a soldier too?" persisted she; "ane doesna'

see the like o' *him* i' Mirkdale oft. He minded me o' auld Langland; braw an' fine he was, but he'd gotten a deil i' his twa een!"

"Yes, Colonel Fielding is a soldier, Jacky; he has fought in India in ever so many battles." Margaret brightened into greater interest now, and, under the old servant's cunning cross-questioning, betrayed much more than she herself knew she had to betray.

"And where does he live, this grand Colonel? Is he his father's eldest son, or a young one among many?" asked Jacky slily.

"He is in England now on furlough for three years, and he has gone into Scotland to see his own people. He had two elder brothers once, but they are both dead since he went to India—but he has four sisters living, two married and two unmarried."

Jacky smiled at her accurate information, and inquired further: "an' has he a mother, Margaret?"

"Yes, and she is coming to Bransby soon. Mrs. Joan Clervaux says she was a celebrated beauty once, and they called her Geraldine Favell."

"That's a bonny name! she'll be rare an' proud o' her son, I'll warrant. I only saw him once; but except master and ould Langland, and Philip 'at was killed i' Spain, I don't mind of a man sa' like what a man suld be to look at. An' is he kind spoken?"

"Oh! yes, Jacky! You should have heard how sorry he was for poor Crosspatch; she might have been his own favourite instead of mine."

Jacky's curiosity was without stint; she considered herself entitled to know all the private concerns of Sylvan Holt and his daughter; when she was not voluntarily taken into their confidence she would worm and question until she elicited the heart of every secret; but once possessed of it, she was silent and faithful as the grave. She continued her interrogatories with a tangible object in view—she wanted to learn exactly how this "grand Colonel" stood in Margaret's good graces—she began to think he stood first of all, even before young Martin Carew, the tried friend and favourite companion of so many happy years.

"That other gentleman wha rade to Deepgyll wi' you, wha was he? A black ill-faured man," she asked.

"His name is Barlow; further I know nothing about him," was Margaret's indifferent reply.

"Parson Wilmot went too, and lile Tom Rowley: you'd be a gay party so many o' you. An' wha companied wi' you that day?"

"Colonel Fielding."

"Colonel Fielding! how oft did you see him when you were down at Oakfield, Margaret—every day?"

"Oh no! only twice. But it was so strange, Jacky, we seemed to know each other and make friends all at once."

"You'll be fain to see him again, my bonnie?"

"I don't suppose I ever shall. It was more than ten years since he had been in Mirkdale before, and it may be twenty before he comes again."

"You've seen him twice too oft if you're never to see him again, but that I'll no' believe. Did Mrs. Joan Clervaux like him?"

"Yes, everybody likes him except Martin Carew. But why do you say I have seen him twice too often if I never see him again, Jacky?"

"Nay, bairn, I can't render an account o' every word I speak—how suld I? I am glad you ha' had a gay time down at Oakfield, for I doubt we'll be only dull when we get master home. Does he write i' ony sort o' gude spirits?"

"I cannot tell what he is feeling or doing, for he says nothing at all about himself; but I hope he is as usual—the letter reads as if he were." And at Jacky's blunt request, Margaret took the letter from her pocket and read aloud.

"Paper don't grin or dodder or flush, you see, bairn," was the servant's comment; "it just speaks, and may be lees. Fra' that bit o' writing ane might say master was hisselt' again, but I misdoubt it sorely."

"Oh! be quiet, Jacky dear; I'm down-hearted to-day! You'll make me cry if you frighten me about my father!" exclaimed Margaret.

"Don't heed me then, my bairn! what an' auld fule's tongue mine is. But it's as well to see, you know, Margaret, if aught does ail him. You hadn't need be scared for a word or twa. You're all he has, an' he's all you ha' o' bluid kin. An' kin's nearer than ony friend."

"Jacky, when you talk in that way, a spasm of terror comes over me! I have no one but him. But I will not listen to

you! Why should he not be as well when he comes home as ever he was?"

"Why should he not, indeed? is it for Jacky to say? I mean only don't be wilfu' blind if he suld not. Tak' you tent o' him an' mak' him tak' tent o' hissel'. He'd gotten a look i' his face when he went awa' that he'll never lose, it's my opinion."

Margaret stood thoughtful and distressed for a little while; then her natural gaiety and cheerfulness of temper, which always looked on the bright side of things, and hoped for the best, returned to her.

"Jacky, you are a dear old croaker!" cried she, laying a hand on the servant's rough, red arm, "but I will not be frightened. I am going to be altogether happy when I have my father back, and won't it do him far more good than if I were to go mooning about like daft Ailie at Thorpstone? always predicting and foreseeing terrible things that it would make me mad to think of?"

Jacky shook her head and told Margaret she was a wild bairn, but she did not know but that she was right.

"Of course, I am right! If I were to carry a long solemn face to meet him he would say it was a changeling and not Margaret!"

"An' you wad be a changeling surely if you did. Wha expects a long, solemn face from you, Sunday's bairn that you are?"

"Pray, what difference does my having been born on Sunday make, Jacky? Is this another of your quaint superstitions?"

"Whisht an' I'll tell you what I ha' heard Lady Frances Langland say about it—she had her whims an' her fancies fu' as strang as any ignorant body o' us a'. Now are you listening?"

Margaret nodded acquiescence, so the servant proceeded in a chanting tone.

"Monday's bairn is fair o' face,
Tuesday's bairn is fu' o' grace,
Wednesday's bairn 's the child o' woe,
Thursday's bairn has far to go,
Friday's bairn is loving and giving,
Saturday's bairn works hard for its living,
But the bairn that is born on a Sabbath day,
Is lucky, and bonnie, and wise, and gay!"

"'Lucky, and bonnie, and wise, and gay!'" echoed Marga-

ret: "that's me! And on what day were you born, Jacky?—on Saturday?"

"On a Thursday, bairn, so the rhyme lees—ha' I far to go? I cam' to Wildwood when I was twal' year auld, an' here ha' I lived ever sin'. Ne'er out o' Mirkdale ha I set foot, an' only ance ha' I been to Middlemoor fair."

"But you don't know what you may do yet, Jacky. You have not lived more than half your life; you may go half round the world!"

"Yes, if you marry a soldier, Margaret, not else," replied the servant, slyly; "I'd be fain to follow you, as Katie out o' Beckford followed Philip Langland's bride. Katie was auld an' stiff, but she had nursed her and wad go: an' baith mistress an' maid an' Philip hissel' they never cam' home to Wildwood ony mair. First he was killed, then his bonnie lillie wife she died, and Katie—it shames me to tell it o' a decent Mirkdale body—she got wed to a rampagious horse-soldier. Lady Frances said to me she was all but a man hersel' soon, tramp-ing after his regiment, an' taking a hand in fighting, an' I knaw not what besides!"

Margaret laughed: "Oh, Jacky! to think of *you* perhaps married to a rampagious horse-soldier!" cried she merrily.

"Wad *I* demean mysel'? Katie was aye flighty an' liked men—but to tak' up wi' a horse-soldier. Why, bairn, what are they but murderers every one? Has that Colonel Fielding ever killed ony puir things? I'd ha' asked him an' I had been you."

"Perhaps he has. He looks as if he would not mind doing it in hot blood."

"Didn't I say he had a deil i' his twa' e'en? If Jacky's aye to wed, give her a man o' peace, pray! none o' your men butchers!"

"Then you do intend to marry some day, Jacky?" Margaret said, with a mischievous little smile.

"What for suld I not—onybody speak straight up for me? I'se mak' a gude working wife for a puir man, suldn't I now?"

"Yes, Jacky, I am sure you would. Let me think—there is that miller from Greatorex—Oh, Jacky, you are blushing! I've found you out."

"Don't be ower sure o' that, Margaret? He's been sweet on me for lang, but we sal never put up our horses together i' t' same stable, I knaw. Nay, bairn, I shan't tell! let me go!"

and with a queer mixture of shyness and shrewdness contending on her countenance, Jacky made her escape out of the room, while Margaret, full of girlish fun, pressed on her to elicit the mighty secret. To think of Jacky in love, Jacky being courted! great, lumbering, hard-featured Jacky, whose visage only needed a moustache to give her as "rampagious" an air as any horse-soldier that ever rode forth conquering and to conquer.

Margaret had resolved to be cheerful, and cheerful she tried to be, but she was very restless also. To and fro the house all the afternoon went she; now singing a verse or two to an old air, then talking to Oscar, and again dropping into a thoughtful silence—her father, Martin, and the day at Deepgyll occupying her by turns; wherever the fit seized her, there she stayed and dreamed it out. The time was very long; her father, she knew, could not arrive before nine or ten o'clock if he came by the coach to Haward's Cross, and each hour that passed seemed drawn out to double the length of its predecessors. As the day advanced, also, the air changed and darkened as if it were surcharged with thunder, while Fernbro' and Litton Fell slowly shrouded themselves in garments of livid mist: a storm was evidently brooding which only waited for night-fall to burst over the valley in tempestuous force and beauty. The wind at first moaned drearily, then came in piercing yells and shrieks, before whose bitter blast the two stately cedars and the silver fir rocked like fragile reeds, while the great oaks groaned and tossed dismally, as if struggling with their tormentor. Margaret, chilled to the bone, as she paced the long passage on the upper story, whither she had gone to look out over the open country and watch the rising of the storm, folded her maid about her head as if she were on the moor; that passage was lonelier, wilder, more desolate than the moor, colder too as the wind whistled down it as through a funnel. Jacky missed her young mistress for a couple of hours or more, but towards tea-time she heard her coming down the stairs, and called out to her to stay her wandering feet beside the bright kitchen fire. Margaret looked in, and seeing all clean and orderly, for the day's work was done, she accepted the invitation to enter, saying—

"I'll have my tea with you too, if you'll let me, Jacky?"

Jacky was proud of the honour.

"Let you, my bonnie! surely I will, an' be fain too!" cried

she with rough tenderness. "Sit you down in t' settle corner, an' I'll make you some cakes—what sort will you ha'—griddle-cakes or singing hinnies?"

"Singing hinnies, Jacky—let me help."

"No, bide still, you're *company*; it's lang sin' I've seen you to tak' tea, an' it's no manners to set you to work when you ha' come at last. Call that gret dog that you pettle so, he's like to ha' his tea wi' his mistress, I know."

Oscar, who was not commonly free of the kitchen until the rest of the household retired to bed, came reluctantly and suspiciously even at Margaret's summons, and when he had got into the middle of the floor, stood with a meek doubtful eye on Jacky for a minute, but, as she neither ordered him out nor charged at him with the rolling pin, he stalked over to his protectress, and made himself exceedingly at home upon the hearth. The singing hinnies were soon compounded and soon baked; Jacky placed the round oak table in a convenient position for her *company*, and made tea in a curious old set of china which was worth more money than she had any idea of. The warmth, the fragrant scent, the scrupulous and delicate cleanliness of all in Jacky's domain made it a far pleasanter place than the summer parlour when a thunder-storm was brewing, and so the *company* thought.

"Now, Margaret, reach to: I ha' not made t' singing hinnies only to look at," said Jacky, setting down a ewer full of rich yellow cream that she had just brought from the dairy, and then lifting her own favourite straight-backed chair into the glow of the hearth. Margaret needed no second invitation; that long march in the corridor had given her a keen appetite; and both she and Oscar did ample justice to Jacky's dainty providings.

"We're boun' to ha' a wild night, I doubt," remarked the servant, as the kitchen grew almost dark under the gathering clouds; and a hoarse swell of wind rolled up and broke violently against the house-end. Margaret rose and went to the window to look out at the wrathful sky, wishing aloud that her father were safe at home.

"Bide ye still, bairn, an' ha' patience: he can't be here these three hours," Jacky assured her. "T' coach doesn't get to Haward's Cross till seven o'clock; then he's to walk to t' Auld Horn, an' to ride ower t' moor here. It'll be full eleven afore we see him."

"And there is no chance that the storm will hold off till after that?" Margaret said.

"No, it'll come down enow; but never fear, bairn! Sylvan Holt is neither sugar nor salt; he'll no melt i' a shower." In fact, before Jacky had finished enjoying her third cup of tea, there came a rattle of hail against the glass, a vivid spear of lightning glanced dazzling across their eyes, and there was a fearful crash of thunder which burst directly overhead and rolled away in harsh reverberations amongst the hills. Margaret cowered back into the settle-corner, shuddering and stopping her ears with her fingers.

"I was never afraid of the thunder before, but that gave me an awful sensation," said she, dropping her hands as the noise died solemnly away. It was not repeated for some minutes, and the silence which ensued was profound, the storm seemed to be taking breathing time for a renewed outbreak after that first terrible overture chord which had made the earth shake.

"My father used to tell us when we were lile bairns at home that t' thunder was God's voice speaking in wrath," Jacky remarked seriously; "an' I think so too—else why suld we hold our breath to listen, an' fall into a tremble as we ha' both done? But t' scientific folk ha' quite another explanation for it; you suld hear Robbie Clarke preaching o' t' wonders of nature."

"I would rather hear you, Jacky. You must tell me one of your strange stories to beguile the time."

"Wait till t' storm's owered then; it's weel nigh deaved me! Oh! but it's awful, bairn! That was a crack!"

They sat quiet for a long while; indeed from the combined uproar of the wind and the rain, their voices must have been inaudible to each other had they attempted to speak. Now and then a blast of hailstones came down the wide chimney, and dropped hissing into the fire, while the lightning flashed and the thunder succeeded continuously. Oscar, a decided enemy to waste, considerably ate up for his share all the singing hinnies that were left after tea was over, and then he and Margaret adjourned to the front of the house to watch the progress of the storm while Jacky sided away the cups and plates. Upon the ridge of Litton Fell and the crest of Fernbro' the spear-lightnings were playing dangerously and incessantly, and the air was shaken terribly by the fast following echoes of the thunder. For half an hour the storm raged

with violence, twisting and rending the ancient trees on the front, which groaned mightily as if deprecating its fierce wrath. Then it rolled over into Scartondale, and gradually southwards, till the thunder was only a faint, distant rumble, but the blinding white sheets of rain still continued to sweep down like a curtain from the sky.

"Come back to t' fireside, Margaret, it 'll bide like this all night!" cried Jacky, presently. "If master's a wise man he'll sleep at t' Auld Horn, and come home in t' morning."

"I am quite sure he will never stay away for any rain," replied Margaret, resuming her comfortable corner of the settle. "Don't you think, Jacky, we should have a fire lighted up in his bedroom?"

"An' a rare bonnie lowe suld we ha' for all Mirkdale to see!" cried Jacky, sharply, "why, bairn, t' chimney's fu' o' auld birds' nests and such like rubbish! There's never been a fire in t' Grange sin' you cam' till 't, except i' t' winter parlour, t' kitchen, an' t' brewhouse. A fire, say ye! I think I see Jacky such a fule as to try t' making o' ane! Why, t' master 'd fling t' brands fra' ane end o' t' chamber to t' other. If he's wet he'll come in here an' get dried, as he's done a hunder' times an' mair!"

"Listen, Jacky, there's some one at the fold-yard gate! Who will it be?" asked Margaret, starting to her feet.

"It's Tom housing t' kye: he hadn't need leave 'em out a night the like o' this. If I 'd knawn, I'd ha' had 'em driven up afore t' milking, an' ha' saved my auld legs t' walk down t' pasture."

Margaret sat down again with a stifled sigh of impatience.

"Bless t' bairn, what ails ye that ye can't bide quiet?" snapped Jacky. "How 's ye to bear up if a trouble suld fall on ye, if ye're sae weary of just *waiting*? You'll wear your bonnie self to skin an' bones with fidgetting an' fretting!"

"I'll be good now, Jacky, if you will only tell me a story. We're both ready, Oscar and I, and let it be one of your very best—a true one."

"Where's t' stocking I'm knitting for t' master? I must ha' my work afore I talk."

The servant soon found what she wanted, and then, settling herself majestically erect in her stiff chair, she asked Margaret—

"Ha' ye ever heard tell o' Nesham Hall?"

"No, Jacky; where is that?"

"Up o' t' border. My mother was a Scotch-woman, you know, an Eliot, an' it's fra her I heard o' Nesham Hall. It was an Eliot owned it when she was a lass, ane o' her kin, a petty laird, wha'd kye, an' sheep, an' a galloway or twa. *Here* we'd call him only a yeoman farmer, but there he held himsel' a gentleman as high as ony, because he'd come o' an auld stock: I can't say a *gude* stock, for them Eliots was as reiving thieves, as any on t' border; an' some o' em were all t' better for a righteous hanging, as I ha' heard my mother say, an' she was like to know——"

"Yes, Jacky, but Nesham Hall?" interposed Margaret, who knew by often experience that unless she checked the storyteller's erratic propensity in the outset she should hear no more of the old border fort that night.

"I'm coming to that now. Nesham Hall had been a place o' defence ance, wi' a moat, an' draw-brig, an' portcullis, an' what na' beside to keep out t' enemy, but i' my mother's day, t' moat was a rank, weedy dyke, they'd built a stone brig, an', for aught I know, made nails o' t' portcullis. But t' stone walls was there, an' a grand farmhouse they made. Robert Eliot was a randy fellow, aye mair blithe at feast an' fray than at biding at hame, an' wi' no manner o' respect neither to t' king nor to t' law o' t' land. You sal judge what heed he paid to his ways fra' ane o' my mother's tales about him.

"Ane morning at breakfast-time a wandering tinkler body came to Nesham Hall back-door; Robert an' his farm-men were all eating at ane table together, as t' custom is i' that country, when he knocked, looked in t' kitchen, an' asked had they anything i' his way to mend. Now, Robert Eliot was a sudden man, an' he just remembered that about t' same time i' t' last year a tinkler had stolen fra' t' bench outside, where it was set to drip, a bran new copper kettle; so as soon as he sees t' stranger, he ups wi' an' aith an' catches t' scared body by t' scruff o' t' neck. 'Thou thief!' cries he, dancing him in amang t' men as if he'd been a lile bairn, 'I'll hang thee up enow o' t' highest tree i' Stapler's market-place;' an' wi' that he bid ane o' his fellows bring him a rope: he made a cunning slip knot an' put it round t' tinkler's neck. 'Thee'll steal na' mair copper kettles!' says Robbie. T' men thought it a fine play—not taking t' master to be in earnest—an' they followed him as he made t' tinkler run i' t' halter all t' way to Stapler's—a matter o' three miles. T' tinkler was wroth, but na' much

feared, for he thought it was only a frolic too, till they cam' right in t' market-place, i' t' midst o' all t' country-side, for it was a gret fair-day. Then he began beg Robbie Eliot he would let him gae, 'Nay,' says Robbie; 'I'se boun' to hang thee up o' this tree;' an' he trailed him under ane o' three elms that grew i' Stapler's market-place: folks flocked round to see t' sport. 'What's thee boun' to do wi' t' puir body?' asks ane. 'I'se boun' to *hang* him,' says Robbie, as grave as a judge. 'Surely *no*,' says another. 'Surely *yes*,' says Robbie; an' wi' that he cast t' rope end far over a big branch, an' calls to ane o' his men come help him heave. 'Nay, Robbie, it's murder! let t' fellow gae!' cries his cousin. 'He stole my new copper kettle that was to make my brose, an' I'll hang him!' cries Robbie wi' another gret aith. An' he *wad* ha' hanged him too, but when t' folk saw he meant it, they laid hands on him an' held him off, tho' he fought like a lion to get at puir tinkler again. Seeing, at last, he shouldn't be let hang him, he screams out, 'Was it thee stole my copper kettle fra' t' door?' an' the miserable body falls down o' his knees an' says, 'Yes, master.' Then says Robbie, 'Let me ha' Tom Painter's pot an' brush—black paint, Tom, an' I'll fettle him off.' Nobody gainsaid that, an' when Tom brought his brush an' pot, Robbie gets t' tinkler flat down o' his back, an' paints his face, an' neck, an' hands as black as a coal, an' then he ties him up to a tree to dry i' t' sunshine. They called that tinkler 'Black Jerry thief' to t' day o' his death."

"But, Jacky, was that the story you meant to tell me when you began about Nesham Hall?" Margaret inquired.

"No, bairn, it wasn't—that's to come yet; but what I mean to tell you happened i' t' same Robert Eliot's time too, an' it shows the bluid he was o'—a graceless, ill-slip o' a graceless stock. Well, bairn, i' ane o' t' upper rooms at Nesham Hall there was a lady's skull. It lay atop o' a big aik kist, all carved ower t' panels wi' scenes fra' t' scriptures, and filled fu' o' women's gear. There was grand gowns o' satin an' velvet all fretted wi' t' moth, an' furs, an' linens, an' rich laces all dropping i' bits. An' besides there was lots o' trinklets and ornaments i' goold an' silver, o' old fashion, but set wi' stones an' pearls o' gret price. Robbie thought ance to sell some o' these precious jewels, but as he was taking 'em to Carlisle he was waylaid an' robbed by two men; they were hanged for t' deed, and when Robbie got back t' jewels he put 'em away again into t' kist where they

was afore. T' story went that lang ago ane o' t' Eliots o Nesham took off a bonnie English lady an' married her against her will to get her fortune. But her father an' her brothers, thinking she went wi' Eliot o' her own liking, sent after her the aik kist wi' her claithing an' ornaments, an' all her money i' another kist, an' they bid her be told that sin' she had taken up wi' their mortal enemy for her husband, she suld never mair see the face o' ane o' them. An' her mother she cursed her, an' said Eliot suld gie her sorrow to sup. An' sure eneu he did. He squandered her money as if it was chucky stanes, an' when it was all gane he just hated t' sight o' his wife. She fretted an' she pined till her beauty was lost, and she never brought him a bairn at all. She wad rail at him madly by t' hour, an' ane day she says, 'O! I wad I were i' my grave?' 'An' I wad sae too?' says he. 'Wad thee see me dead wi' joy? Then will I surely *live* to spite thee!' cries his wife; 'and forth fra' Nesham Hall my bones and my kist sal never gae while an Eliot bides master in it!' An' she *did* live to spite him an' to see him flung fra his horse by his ain door, an' killed on t' spot. But his nephew, wha got Nesham when he died, wanted to drive her out. *Living* she wad not gae, an' it was said he murdered her an' buried her under what was t' kitchen hearthstane. I' my mother's time a woman's skeleton was found there: they carried t' skull an' laid it atop o' t' aik kist, an' left t' rest o' t' bones where they was. Now, Robert Eliot had Nesham Hall then, an' he sware that he'd ha' nae ghaists an' nae skulls i' his house to his knowledge, so ane morning he gave orders that baith kist an' skull suld be flung into t' Millden Pool. 'An,' says he in his jeering way, 'to show the lady honour due, though she cam' to Nesham Hall mounted on a pillion an' tied hand an' foot, she shall leave it i' a carriage and four.' They yoked four horses to t' biggest waggon, an' it took five men to carry t' aik kist down stairs an' put it in: but Robert Eliot wad bring t' skull i' his ain hand. He tossed it upon some straw they'd set to steady t' kist, making as if it burnt his fingers and cried: 'Now drive away wi' thy deil's load, and mind ye fling it into t' Millden Pool fro' t' Blackrigg!' That was t' deepest spot i' t' Pool. Well, t' carter cracked his whip, an' t' beasts tried to draw, but bless you, bairn! not a hoof could they stir fra' t' grund! At that Robbie Eliot fell into a gret rage. He cursed an' sware, an' he wi' his men pushed while t' horses pulled; but it made no

odds—t' wheels didn't an' wouldn't stir. It was early i' morning when they began, an' they didn't stop till nightfall. Then says Robert: 'Carry t' kist back an' put t' skull where ye faund it; for I perceive that surely they've to bide at Nesham Hall till we Eliots be all gane! Now that's true, Margaret, my mother 'd seen both kist an' skull of 't."

Margaret was a model listener to old world stories. She accepted the wildest and most improbable fictions in perfect good faith, never stooping to question the narrator for explanatory details, or to suggest common-place accidents for upsetting the most slenderly constructed supernatural theories. She had listened to Jacky's picturesque and romantic lore in this confiding spirit ever since she was a little all-believing child, and it would still have been one of the thoughts the furthest from her mind to attempt to throw discredit on any of her wild tales. Jacky had her vanity; she liked to see Margaret's face brighten with interest or intelligent surprise; to see her fine eyes dilate, and her curved lips open with a pretty, breathless terror as the mystery unfolded itself; and then to see her fall back in her chair and cry, "Tell me another, Jacky, I am sure you cannot be tired yet," was the most enticing flattery in the world. Margaret pleaded as usual for the continuance of the stories, but the servant bade her observe that while they had been talking, the evening had sped, and that the clock was just upon the stroke of ten.

"An' I must make up t' fire to broil a steak for master's supper, an' set t' kettle on," added Jacky, bestirring herself diligently. "You can help me, bairn, if you'll lay t' cloth on t' little round table ready for him."

"What *here*, in the kitchen, Jacky?"

"Yes, isn't it as bright as ony palace? He'll be fain of a bit o' fire, for if he's ridden fra' Middlemoor he'll not have a dry thread on him."

Margaret accordingly covered the oak tea-table with a fine damask napkin, and set all in order as she was bid. That passed away another ten minutes, and then she knelt down on the hearth by Oscar, who was dreaming, snorting, and growling crossly in his sleep. "What ails you, old boy?" said she pulling one of his ears gently to wake him, but without effect.

"Which way does his nose point, Margaret?" Jacky asked. "For they say i' Mirkdale that when a dog dreams like that there's strangers coming to t' house."

"Oh! Jacky, what queer fancies you have. His nose points down to Wildfoot."

"Then your father 'll come that way, and may be bring some one wi' him, but if he doesn't he's half a stranger himself!"

"I wish he were here, for it is raining faster than ever," said Margaret, ensconcing herself by the window and striving to penetrate the murky night. The light of fire and candle danced in the outer darkness, but nothing external was visible, except that once Margaret thought she saw a dusky object moving towards the door, but as it remained swaying to and fro, she at last concluded it to be only a branch hanging over the wall into the foldyard. Jacky had resumed her knitting when all her preparations were in a proper degree of forwardness, and now sat solemnly awaiting her master's arrival: then Margaret came back to the fireside, but she also was quite silent, and through the stillness of the vast old kitchen the peevish, sudden blasts of rain against the glass resounded with wearisome monotony.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SYLVAN HOLT'S RETURN.

WITH all their affection, the women were not so quick-eared as Oscar. When the hush within was most profound he suddenly lifted his head, listened, then rose, stretched himself, and stalked to the door. At his first signal Jacky had hastily thrust her knitting into the dresser drawer, and having lighted her lantern, she and Margaret went to the yard-gate by which any one coming on horseback over the moor would enter.

"Oh! I wish the wind would lull for a moment; I can hear nothing!" cried Margaret impatiently, for just then the storm seemed to have redoubled its fury.

Jacky bade her "whist," and both listened intently for some seconds. "That's t' crunch o' t' carriage wheels!" said the servant; "it'll come up to t' hall door, bairn. Master's done wisely no' to ride Faustus home through this hurly-burly!"

Margaret's heart beat loud and fast as they rapidly traversed the house and issued into the windy porch, whence, through

the clouds of driving rain, they descried a carriage drawn by two horses laboriously mounting the rough cart-road to the Grange. The gleaming lamps threw a faint radiance around them in every direction, and showed to Margaret and the servant a pile of heavy luggage on the roof and a second person sitting inside with Sylvan Holt.

"Why, if Oscar's nose wasn't right!" exclaimed Jacky in a tone of angry surprise and bewilderment which even at that moment made her young mistress smile. "Master's surely gone daft to bring onybody here wi'out a single word o' warning. I couldn't ha' thawt it o' him!"

There was no time for any further remark, for almost before the vehicle stopped, Sylvan Holt descended from it and clasped Margaret, who had run out to meet him, in his arms. He was followed more deliberately by a small dark man, who, the moment he felt solid ground beneath his feet, began to stamp and to stretch his cramped limbs to revive his benumbed circulation, exclaiming—

"Thank God, that's over! such roads, such horses. It has, indeed, been a hard tug, Mr. Holt."

"So it has, Meddowes, but I warned you what to expect," responded Sylvan Holt grimly, and then he turned to his daughter once more, passed his hand tenderly over her head, which was all wet with the rain, and kissed her warm soft lips, asking if his darling was very glad to see him home again that her eyes were looking so over-bright.

"Oh! yes, so glad! I did not know until this moment how glad I could be! Come in, come in;" and clinging fast to his arm she brought him straight through into the kitchen, and set him in Jacky's chair for examination, as she said. The examination was conducted chiefly by kisses, but as there was no change in the manner of their reception, she presently perched herself on his knee, with her arm round his neck, and her soft cheek against his, and declared that he was just the same as ever—her own black-browed, stern-visaged, tender-hearted, dear old father. He was as happy as herself to indulge this fond enthusiasm of affection, but at length she sprang up, reproaching herself for forgetting how tired he must be; so he laid aside his travelling gear, and began to straighten his limbs by a march through and through the echoing kitchen.

"We have got him back, and he shall never leave us again,

shall he, Oscar? Rejoice, old boy!" whispered Margaret to her dog, who was following Sylvan Holt solemnly to and fro, glad to see him again, no doubt, but not showing it exuberantly. For herself she was half-wild with delight, her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, and she looked the very impersonation of happy youthful loveliness—if the parting had been sad the meeting was infinitely sweet, sweet enough to repay all past anxiety. Her father seemed touched by her warm affection.

"Come, let me look at my treasure again!" said he, stopping at the firelight for the purpose. After gazing in her beaming face for a minute in silence, he kissed her smooth white forehead, drew her to his breast, and said, "Thou'rt more like her than ever!" and for a moment his eyes glittered as hers had done before.

Meanwhile the stranger stood in the hall, watching the removal of the luggage by Anty and the driver. Jacky was contemplating him with extreme disfavour.

"What's me to do wi' yon doited lawyer body? I know he's a lawyer by t' look on him," soliloquized she under her breath.

The little man must have been singularly quick of hearing, for he promptly solved her difficulty by suggesting—

"Oh, you may put me anywhere under shelter; in the hay-loft, if you like."

Jacky stared in astonishment, thinking surely the man could not be *canny* to have such long ears, and then said with great asperity—

"It's t' best lodging you're like to get at Wildwood Grange this night, unless you choose to lie upo' t' lang settle i' t' house-place, if Oscar 'll only let ye bide there; but he's no favourer o' strangers, isn't Oscar."

The new comer was rather surprised at being so literally understood, but he refrained from answering; and when the boxes, portmanteaus, and travelling bags, were all brought in-doors, he dashed out to the carriage, examined every pocket, lifted every cushion, and peeped under both seats, in quest of any waifs or strays that might have been overlooked, and finding none, he returned into the hall, picked out from the luggage a square tin box, and marched through into the kitchen with it:

"For all t' world," said Jacky, indignantly, "as if the Grange belanged to *him*."

As he entered, Sylvan Holt and Margaret were still standing together upon the hearth; his hands were resting heavily on her shoulders, and she was gazing up into his face with the most affectionate scrutiny.

"This is *her* daughter, Meddowes," said he, turning her round abruptly to confront the stranger, "you would have seen the likeness in her face, would you not? Shake hands, Maggie, he is the faithfulest friend thy father has found in the world—the only one he can swear will prove a faithful friend to thee."

Mr. Meddowes bowed low over the shy little hand that was immediately extended towards him and muttered a few awkward, almost inaudible words of compliment, after which he retreated to the lang-settle and deposited thereon himself and his tin box without encountering any remonstrance whatever from Oscar. Indeed, so far from supporting Jacky's insinuation, when she returned to the kitchen, intent on her culinary duties, she found the lawyer and the staghound on terms of great amity; Oscar was even submitting to be caressed and to have his ears played with by him, a most remarkable instance of urbanity.

Sylvan Holt had again betaken himself to pacing the kitchen floor, with Margaret beside him; they were talking softly of various incidents that had occurred during their separation, and Mr. Meddowes, that his presence might be as little as possible a restraint on them, concentrated his attention on the steak that Jacky was cooking to admiration. She little thought his knowledge in that branch of the art was as practical and perfect as her own; perhaps if she had, she would not have felt it necessary to keep a strict though furtive watch upon him as he detected her doing.

"I hope there's nought amiss wi' him," said she to herself, "he's gotten a queer uncanny look as ever I saw. What a gret forehead he has, an' them eyes o' his are i' twenty spots at once. I wish he'd laugh or speak, or do anything but spy."

Jacky was of a morally suspicious temper, and was much inclined to see treachery in the lawyer's swift but stealthy looks and ways, but if she had heard her master's panegyric on his character she could scarcely have done him that injustice, evilly disposed as her mind was towards him on account of his unexpected arrival. When she had set supper on the table, and seen the travellers settled to the enjoyment of it, she retired up-stairs to devise some expedient for his accommodation; but,

after opening door after door to rouse only dust and spiders, she was at last forced despairingly to acquiesce in her own first suggestion that he must lie on the lang-settle for that night at least. She took from the chest an armful of blankets, lavender-scented sheets, and trudged with them to the kitchen, where she cast them down on the dresser with a lamentable groan. Jacky hated to be put out of her way; she was a machine that worked well and heartily in its own accustomed fashion, but creaked miserably when pressed in its speed. Supper was over, and Oscar was disposing of its relics while the rest of the party had drawn domestically round the fire; something there was in this comfortable arrangement—added to the grand grievance of which she had received no more authentic warning than Oscar's disturbed dreams—that quite upset the small remains of her temper. She demanded sharply, were they going to sit there till to-morn? Didn't they see it was going on to one o'clock? Then she lighted Margaret's candle and bade her go off and get a good beauty sleep, and told Mr. Meddowes that if he would shift himself and his box she would see to making him up a bed.

The lawyer, wonderstruck, immediately complied, but Margaret was restive and would not stir a step until her father did. She coaxed him to walk about again, and then whispered a reminder of his promised explanations.

"Not now, Maggie; give me a few days' rest, and you shall know all," replied he in the same subdued tone, while a most painful expression contracted his grey face. She was sorry she had mentioned the old subject, and on Jacky's reiterating her advice, she kissed him fondly, bade good-night, and went to bed.

"Is this the best accommodation you can provide for my friend, Jacky?" Sylvan Holt asked, as the servant was proceeding to fold blanket after blanket and lay them along the settle to supply the place of a mattress.

"Either this or t' hay chamber," replied Jacky curtly; "but he'll lie safer and warmer here."

Mr. Meddowes, though he was contemplating the preparations for his repose with internally dismal forebodings, tried to protest that he should be quite comfortable, and made an apology to Jacky for intruding into her sanctuary which mollified her acrimony in some degree; nobody likes to have a trouble undervalued, and the servant took pains to show that she con

sidered her present task a trouble of no small magnitude. The lawyer had discovered the important position she held in the household, and taken her personal estimate of it and herself accurately and promptly; her hard-featured blunt face was a good index to her character, and his first verdict thereon did not on better acquaintance call for reconsideration.

"A Scotch tongue and moral grafted on broad Yorkshire shrewdness; much sagacity, obstinacy, and self-sufficiency, indomitable courage and fidelity, and a warm-heartedness, rough outside but sweet to the core, like one of her own russet pippins;"—he certainly did her more justice than in her present humour she was likely to do him.

"You and I have fared worse than this, Meddowes. You'll remember our makeshifts of five-and-twenty years ago in your dreams—Spain, and that intolerable auberge at Arles," remarked Sylvan Holt.

Mr. Meddowes endeavoured to look amiably unconscious of the difference five-and-twenty years make in a man's enjoyment of discomforts, and said he wished he might, but he should try to make the rattling shutters fast before he thought of sleep, for they reminded him of an unpleasant adventure in the Pyrenees, where he should always think he had had a narrow escape of being murdered in his bed for the sake of a handsome rifle and seven gold pieces. There were many allusions to former travels, but no full details, and the storm filled up the frequent pauses.

"You don't often hear the wind like this in your close quarters at home, Meddowes?" Sylvan Holt said, as it came violently against the house-end. The lawyer replied no, not often, and Jacky muttered something about wishing that the ill-wind that had blown him there would blow him away again, for she was at her wit's end for pillows to conclude her preparations; she rolled up another blanket, covered it with a sheet, and saying sharply, "That's t' best I can do for you, at any rate;" began to rake out the kitchen fire with vehemence.

"My good soul, let it be," whispered Meddowes; "I don't like to be left in the dark."

"You can ha' a candle—I always put out t' fire afore I sleep," was the sturdy response, and she continued her operations. Sylvan Holt apparently considered the matter too insignificant for his interference, for bidding his guest resign himself philosophically to the force of circumstances, he wished

him good-night, and left him to improve his acquaintance with the servant.

"I promise you to see the fire out before closing my eyes," persisted Meddowes, with touching humility.

"I ha' found men 's no' to be trusted;" and Jacky raked on until every bit of live coal was strewn upon the hearth; then she rose erect, straightened her obstinate neck, and gave the stranger a sharp, defiant glance. But Jacky had met her match in the quiet lawyer; as she left the hearth he coolly possessed himself of the shovel, and drew the coals and cinders together.

"You're not surely going to keep t' fire burning up o' t' hearthstone!" cried Jacky; "what manners is that i' a strange house?"

"Yes, I am," replied Meddowes; "unless you prefer that I should keep it burning in the grate."

"It'll soon go out—there's nae mair fuel i' t' house place!" and Jacky looked solidly triumphant at outwitting him.

"Yes, there's an old chair," insinuated the dark gentleman, pointing significantly at the servant's peculiar property.

"You wadn't surely go to break up t' furniture?" exclaimed she in unfeigned horror.

"Oh, yes!—doors, anything!" responded Meddowes gravely.

"Then tak' your ain way; you beat all ever I saw!" snapped Jacky, and with a great deal of unnecessary noise she restored the coals to the grate and brought the wood basket from a closet; "There! set t' Grange a fire if you've a mind to!" added she.

"Never do anything so unnecessary," replied Meddowes. "By the by, have you often storms as violent as this up here?"

Jacky was sulky, but she condescended to answer after feigning not to hear, and causing the question to be repeated.

"Sometimes we ha' worse, i' harvest time chiefly. I ha' seen fields o' ripe corn laid as flat as t' floor."

"The wind makes a wonderful noise all round the house; it ought to be strongly built to stand this sort of thing often."

"It is strongly built. They didn't run up places o' lath an' plaster when Wildwood Grange was made. But speaking o' t' wind. You suld go up to t' top story, i' t' corridor, where Margaret took her walk this afternoon. I'd rather be up o' t' moor mysel'."

"Your mistress is a beautiful young creature to be secluded here; it must often be terribly dull and lonely for her."

"Margaret Holt's t' flower o' all Mirkdale, but as for her being lonesome, I don't see how that can be when she has her father, an' mysel', an' Mrs. Joan Clervaux, besides them that come an' go to her house. She never made no plaint to me; she's o' doors most days wi' this gret dog o' hers, an' s' very blithe an' frolicsome—eh! she's wild sometimes, I tell her. It's only lately she's turned a bit serious about her father—there's something ails him for certain, but what it is wha' knows?"

Mr. Meddowes was staring contemplatively at the fire, and did not respond to this *feeler*. Jacky therefore said no more, and presently after, having concluded her domestic labours, she sourly bade him good-night and left him to his cogitations or slumbers, muttering as she shut the door, "I'm far fra' sure o' him, but it's not much mischief he can do wi' Oscar lying there, unless he's gotten a charm to bewitch him wi', an' I wadn't be him to try it on t' beast if I valued my life: however I'm not going mount guard over him; if master will bring such like cattle home he must watch 'em himsel'."

CHAPTER XIX.

LAWYER MEDDOWES.

THE first thing the lawyer did when he found himself alone was to rise from his seat with a jerk, exclaiming, emphatically:

"I had no conception of this dreary old rats' castle! How can a sane man vegetate here when Abbeymeads is standing empty and Rushfall is going to rack and ruin? Oh, that miserable woman accounts for it all! Why did the fool ever run his head into matrimony?"

Mr. Meddowes was a bachelor—some of his friends said, an intense old maid—but, at all events, he was a man with as little sentiment and as little romance as a good man can have. He would tell you he knew right and wrong, honesty and treachery, and that he could appreciate genuine family affection, but

for fine feelings and passionate professions, he thought them mere trash and lumber on the way of human life, and would gladly have seen them, to use his own expression, carted off it straightway and pitched into Lethe. He was often a harsh censor, because, having few weaknesses himself, he could not be lenient to the weaknesses of others : to hear him speak sometimes you might have thought he was a man without a heart, had not all his acts tended to disprove the libel ; his colleagues said of him that with all his ability he had too many fastidious whims and altogether too much of the woman in him to push rough-shod over other folk's misfortunes to reap his harvests, and that he would never become a rich man by his profession. This was likely enough, for, as a rule, he carried his hand in his pocket and was always giving ; in fact, he was satisfied with his means and his career, and, being a solitary man, had no wish to leave anything behind him but his good name. He possessed the true talisman of success, however his use of it might be regarded. All who came within the sphere of his influence he won, and the tact he had in mastering strong unruly wills was, to say the least of it, remarkable. That he should have gained the entire respect and confidence of a misery-embittered man like Sylvan Holt speaks for his strong moral power.

His present situation was unusual decidedly, and after a moment's contemplation of his impromptu bed, not all his compassionate respect for Sylvan Holt, or all his admiration for Margaret, could prevent him from crying aloud that they lived like savages in that out-of-the-way place. He would have been extremely glad to have found himself within reach of his own comfortable four-poster, for though he had suggested the hay-loft to Jacky, he was one of the last men in the world to accommodate himself to primitive modes of existence ; Sylvan Holt's reference to their foreign makeshifts five-and-twenty years ago was only prompted by the recollection how very ill he had supported them even then. As he groaned in spirit over his strange lodging, the fire gradually died out, and under the glimmer of a single candle the vast kitchen looked far from cheerful. The remote corners seemed indefinitely mysterious, an ancient clock whirred and ticked hoarsely by the door, and the windows, spite of his attempts to fasten them, rattled peevishly, as if an impatient hand shook them from without, and every timber in the old Grange creaked and groaned as if

its hour of destruction was come. Presently he grew weary and sleepy, but he could not fashion to dispose of himself on the settle at all, so he seated himself in Jacky's chair, and tried to take repose there. But for a long time the attempt was useless, and when, at last, weariness overcame him, his slumbers were pestered with the wildest and most improbable dreams. Jacky was fighting him for the possession of the tin box to light her fire with, then she was tucking him up in a child's crib which suddenly turned into a clock-case full of creeping things innumerable. Again, he was in a chase going at a break-neck gallop over hill and dale, and his impression was that he was going this awful pace to be married to Jacky. Then the chase was overturned, and he came down with a terrible crash upon the floor and woke. Oscar sprang up and growled over him menacingly, as if demanding what he meant by conducting himself in so unseemly a fashion in the dead of the night, but presently he let him get up and resume his uneasy chair.

"I never did believe in ghosts before, though I was afraid of 'em, but I am sure this place is haunted," muttered the lawyer. "Oh, my bones, my poor aching bones!"

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE GRANGE.

"How long is t' strange gentleman likings to bide up at Wildwood, master?" Jacky inquired, waylaying Sylvan Holt for the purpose as he came out of his room the next morning. He said he positively could not tell.

"Then what's me to do wi' him? He can't lie nowhere every night, and there's not a spare bed i' t' house? He's a delicate bit o' a body as ane may see, an' he'll no' put up with makeshifts wi' as good a grace as some o' us. What's he here for? Where did you pick him up?"

But Sylvan Holt was now out of hearing, or at least out of answering distance, and therefore, the questions which safely vented Jacky's bit of temper did not provoke the furious retort that she might have received at another time.

Sylvan Holt seemed to have laid aside his former savage mood, but there was an expression of profound weariness and melancholy in all his gestures and all his movements. He went into the porch and stood for some time looking down into the hollow of the valley, where the swollen course of Blackbeck showed amongst the trees. The rain had ceased several hours before, but there were dark watery masses of cloud blowing to and fro the sky, and the land was sodden and drenched. Presently he paced across the turf towards the road, and Margaret, who had been watching for him from her window, discerned a slight inclination in his frame, a stoop of the shoulders which was new to her. Age seemed to have crept upon him unawares, and the wind lifted the grey hair from his massive forehead and scattered it as irreverently as if it had been toying with the sunny locks of an innocent child. There was something so unlike her father in this appearance of self-neglect or forgetfulness, and something withal so dejected in his whole air, that Margaret was painfully touched, and hastily tying on her hat, she ran out to him crying—

“Wait for me, dear father! I am coming.”

He did not hear her, for he continued to descend the lane by the woodside without stopping. She soon overtook him, and linking her arm affectionately through his, she began to tell him how glad she was to have him safe at home with her.

“It cheers me too to hear my little daughter's voice once more, because it is always trilling and happy,” said he, patting her hand tenderly.

“It was a long day yesterday, waiting for you, father. I hope if you have ever to go away again, you will take me with you.”

“I may safely promise that, Maggie, for I have made my last pilgrimage. You have had trouble since I left you? Crosspatch is dead.”

“Yes—don't let me talk about her now. She is buried up there, and Martin Carew cut her name in the bark of one of the trees. Martin Carew is gone away to India with his regiment; did I tell you that before, father?”

“You said he was under orders before I left, Maggie, and you mentioned it again in your letter.”

Sylvan Holt glanced anxiously in his daughter's face, but it was so placid and quiet that any disturbing thought he might

have had concerning her was set at rest. Her old playfellow's presence or absence was not an hourly recurring joy or pain, as he had once almost feared to find it. They were silent until they reached Wildfoot, and then they sat down together on the stile.

"You have told me nothing yet of your journey, father?" Margaret then said, hesitatingly.

"There will be time enough to talk about it by-and-by; for the present, I have many other things in my mind, Maggie, and you must be patient."

He appeared to shrink from the subject with such violence of repulsion, that she was almost as glad to leave it as himself; still the fact of there being an acknowledged reserved theme between them was a restraint. Margaret would have chosen, perhaps, to hear it discussed and banished at once, but her father had not nerve to enter even into an outline of events, which must inevitably shock and grieve her more than anything life had yet inflicted upon her: so he waited, and it shortly happened that the hard task was taken out of his hands, and rudely performed by one who had no interest in it but curiosity.

While they were still seated on the stile they saw Mr. Meddowes, tin box in hand, carefully picking his way down the hill towards them. Sylvan Holt and his daughter had been so long habituated to their unceremonious and primitive mode of living, that it did not occur to either of them to inquire particularly after their guest's last night's rest. Sylvan Holt nodded absently, and Margaret asked him how he liked their valley—did he not think it beautiful? But the lawyer, a Londoner born and bred, was no enthusiast for rural scenes, and his disturbed slumbers had not conduced to put him in a frame of mind to enjoy a raw damp morning; he was, in fact, both peevish and sour, and he wanted his breakfast, so his reply was not very gracious. He said Mirkdale appeared to him rather dreary than otherwise, and he certainly should not like to live in it.

"Oh! you should see it in August when the moors are in bloom," Margaret assured him; "*then* you would admire it."

"I prefer London to the country at all seasons," said Meddowes, obstinately. "Somebody once declared he could see no difference between one green field and another—well, I am of that somebody's opinion whoever he was."

"Then suppose we all go in-doors," was Margaret's cheerful reply; so they walked back to the Grange, where the lawyer

gradually recovered his natural amenity of temper as Jacky's excellent breakfast appeased his hunger. He softened so far as even to allow that there might be some things in which Mirkdale surpassed London, and instanced as one the richness and sweetness of its cream; and then he entertained Margaret by telling her some of the tricks that were played with innocent milk, flour, sugar, and other comestibles. Margaret wondered that the people who consumed them were not poisoned, and said how wicked a place London must be! But immediately after remembering all that Colonel Fielding had told her of its gaieties and glories, she added, that it must be very delightful too, and hoped that some day she should see it. Sylvan Holt had hitherto remained buried in silence, but at this novel sentiment he looked up in his daughter's face, and said, "See London, Maggie! what has possessed you with that fancy? I brought you up to love Wildwood!"

"And so I do love Wildwood, dear father, but still I should like to see the Court and some of the grand balls," persisted she.

Mr. Meddowes smiled. "You will live to do that, I dare say, and to sicken of it very heartily," replied he.

"Do people ever tire of London, then? It seems strange they should, when there must always be so much that is beautiful and new."

"Nothing is new long—a *gay* London life would prove the sorest drudgery to you. You would never get a comfortable night's rest——" and the charms of that, with his recent experience of the Grange kitchen and Jacky's high-backed chair, recurred in vivid contrast to the lawyer's memory.

"You would be out of your element in fashionable society, Maggie," said her father. "Depend upon it, Mirkdale suits you best and always will. I would not trust her—trained as she has been—in that intoxicating, selfish whirl, Meddowes, for millions!"

"Country lilies and roses soon fade in our atmosphere," added the lawyer, glancing at Margaret, and then touching his own parchment cheek significantly. She laughed, and innocently appropriating the compliment, said she did not think there was any risk for hers at present—she longed to see London, just as she used formerly to long to see Cinderella's ball and pumpkin coach.

"I'm glad to hear it! Dream of Vanity Fair afar off, if you like; but beware of setting your innocent little foot into any

of its booths, that is my sage counsel. Mirkdale has the better air for spring flowers," said Meddowes.

Here Jacky came in at the summons of the bell to remove the breakfast things, and fixing her shrewd grey eye on the lawyer, she sternly addressed him. "So it didn't please you to sleep in t' bed I'd made up for you upo' t' lang settle, why couldn't you say so?" demanded she, with an air of being excessively disgusted at his pride.

"Oh! my excellent creature, don't say a word about it! I did exceedingly well, thank you!" protested Meddowes, hastily, for he did not wish Sylvan Holt or his daughter to know how tenderly sensitive he had been to his nocturnal discomforts.

"You didn't do exceedingly well, so where's t' use o' saying so?" responded Jacky, waspishly. "You'll not have t' chance o' t' settle again, I can tell you, for I sal gi'e you a bed elsewhere an' sleep on it mysel'."

Meddowes was internally thankful; he foresaw that he was going to succeed to Jacky's own sacred couch, which, even if located in one of the ruinous chambers, would be, he never doubted, stuffed with the very best of goose feathers. But for once the lawyer was mistaken in his previsions. Later in the day Jacky met him alone in the hall, and conveying him up to the third story, threw open the door of a vast wilderness room, and pointing to a hard narrow pallet in the remotest corner said, "Now, that's where you'll ha' to lie to-night—it's clean an' sweet, an' if t' rats don't eat you—for which there's sma' temptation—an' t' chimney stack don't fall through t' roof, as it threatened to do last night, you'll tak' nae harm, tho' you are so nesh. T' rain doesn't come in at yon far corner." Meddowes quaked in silence, and Jacky was avenged.

CHAPTER XXI.

A REVELATION.

BREAKFAST being over, Margaret hovered about to see what her father was going to do with himself, but finding that he showed no disposition for going out of doors again, she proposed to Oscar that they two should have a walk on the moor.

"Would you really walk in such threatening, rainy weather?" asked Meddowes, glancing at the lead-coloured clouds.

"Yes; it is wild and stormy, but when I am up on the ridge of the fell, it is grand to watch the changes in the valley: will you go?"

"No, thank you; no, thank you, indeed, my dear young lady!" replied the lawyer, shuddering; "besides I have some work on hand that will not permit me to take holiday to-day, and I am afraid you must also forego your expedition for a short period. Mr. Holt, we promised to go to business straight-way, did we not? and your daughter's presence is necessary, I think."

"Yes, Maggie, you must stay here, we want you," said Sylvan Holt, nervously. "Make the matter as brief as possible; tell her no more than needs at present—the rest may come another time."

"Certainly, certainly. Will you be pleased to be seated, Miss Holt?" and the lawyer drew a third chair to the table.

"But what do you want with me?" Margaret asked, glancing at her father, who was leaning over the table with his face hidden in his hands. She felt bewildered and uneasy, as if some calamity were threatening her.

"Nothing very terrible," replied Mr. Meddowes; "my intelligence would please some girls, but I almost think you are above being affected by it. I only want to tell you what a rich heiress you are, and then to go into a few necessary details."

Margaret's colour deepened, and she sat down, at the same time drawing a little nearer to her father and resting her hand upon his arm, while Oscar, not at all comprehending why his beloved mistress was entrapped into staying quietly there instead of taking her usual ramble out-of-doors with him, placed himself majestically at her elbow to keep an eye on the proceedings of the strange gentleman.

"You may perhaps be surprised at the suddenness of my announcement," said the lawyer; "but really there is nothing in it; instead of merely inheriting Wildwood at your father's death you must also inherit his other property—Abbeymeads, Rushfall, and Brightebank;" at the mention of her father's death, Margaret's eye travelled with a flickering of pain towards him, but still she did not speak—her heiressship was the vaguest of vague ideas to her—but the idea of losing him was terrible.

"Further you must be informed that you are left absolutely in control of everything without any reserves, or pledges, or conditions, so that you could alienate all your possessions the day after you received them if you chose; neither are you encumbered with guardians or advisers of any kind."

"But you need never forget that you have two proved friends in Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Meddowes here," interposed Sylvan Holt.

"And, of course, we all hope you will be an experienced woman before you are called on to support your dignities," said the lawyer, "neither need we lose sight of the probability that they may ultimately rest on other shoulders better able to bear them."

Sylvan Holt looked up impatiently, and bade him keep to the point and not wander off into generalities.

"Enough said, Mr. Holt, I will; but it is only right to mention such contingencies."

Another vexed gesture from the master caused him to turn again to Margaret, and to proceed with a slight inflection of sarcasm in his voice, though there was no trace of it in his countenance. "Many years ago, Miss Holt, circumstances occurred which made your father out of love with all the pomps and vanities of the world, and drove him to take refuge in this seclusion. What those circumstances were I need not explain, though I must ever deplore their results both to him, to yourself, and to all who depended upon his example and encouragement —"

Sylvan Holt's dark blood rose, and he took the words angrily out of the lawyer's mouth: "Meddowes, you are a fool!" exclaimed he, without any circumlocution. "Did I bring you here to preach? There is one thing for you to understand, Maggie, and at present one only—and that is the heavy burden that must come upon you when I am gone. I have thrust it aside, and I leave you free to do the same if you choose. I believe you would be happier without this laborious grandeur, but Meddowes says, no, you must make your trial and use your rights. Well, use them or give them up, whichever you prefer! I place no restrictions in your way—none."

"And I trust she will not be so cowardly as to hide her talent, and creep away from the station to which she is called," said the lawyer.

Margaret seemed rather troubled and bewildered than

otherwise, but all she said was, "Oh! father, I wish I had been educated as women are! I am not fit for any place but Wildwood!"

"And I should be very glad to think you would always stay there," replied her father earnestly.

Meddowes shook his head: "No, no; we will not listen to that poor suggestion; one sacrifice is enough," said he. "Such seclusion is neither to be expected nor desired; young birds must fly. And as for the education question, Miss Margaret is not too old to learn now."

"But I would not like to go away from Mirkdale and leave my father," interrupted Margaret, hastily.

"We will consider of that afterwards. I must now claim your patient attention while I read to you certain papers in your father's presence:" and from the tin box Meddowes extracted a document containing a summary of the farms, mills, tenements, and water-courses on the great estate of Abbeymeads; this he proceeded to recite in a dry monotonous tone, until Sylvan Holt checked him to ask if he considered this tedious process necessary.

"Absolutely," was the reply; "I have sanctioned your crotchets about the will, but I must insist on your daughter being made acquainted in your lifetime with what are her natural possessions. Bless my life, sir, she might be defrauded of one half of them and never know!"

"She would be none the worse if she were," replied Sylvan Holt, grimly.

"Well, Mr. Holt, if not for your satisfaction or for hers, then for my own!" And certainly Meddowes did seem to feel an intense satisfaction in mouthing over all the appurtenances, manorial rights, &c., &c., of the two great properties of his employer and friend. Margaret was like her father; she thought it all excessively irksome, but refrained from saying a word, and when the lawyer laid a little book before her, and said, "I prepared that for you to study at your leisure," she hoped the sitting was at an end. Her father asked what the book contained.

"A copy of what I have been reading—the extent of each farm and the various rentals simplified for a young lady's comprehension. Now, by a careful reference to that, Miss Margaret, you may be your own steward if you like," said he.

"I hope you will be the happier in looking forward to such

an idle appointment, Maggie," observed her father, sarcastically. "You do not throw off the startled expression Meddowes' first announcement gave you, and this is pleasanter still."

"I am not the happier for looking forward to anything——" she was going to say, "to anything without you," but she stopped short.

"I told Meddowes you would be better contented with Wildwood and a tidy portion of five thousand pounds than with all this paraphernalia of wealth, but he refused to hearken and called me mad; so I presume my gay little Margaret, who is at a loss how to spend half-a-crown now, must some day make her curtsy in society as a rich heiress. How shall you support the novel character—eh, Maggie?"

"I believe, father, I might almost have liked it if you and I had lived at one of these fine places from the beginning, but now I wish you had never told me—I do indeed: I shall be so strange and ignorant!"

"Ah! Meddowes threatened that you would live to reproach me, and here it comes already?"

"I reproach you, dear father; oh! no; I do not mean that!"

"Whose fault was it that you were not educated as other women are? Mine, Margaret."

"Never mind whose fault it was, so that it can be amended," interposed the lawyer, who did not like the regretful tone the affair was taking. "Miss Margaret will wear her honours meekly as they ought to be worn, and so they will become her perfectly. I had almost finished my part of the business when you put me out; when I have mentioned Brightebank I have done: it is a little place not far from Abbeymeads which was settled on your mother, but as it is only a house with the surrounding gardens the name is enough; it is mentioned in the book I have given you."

"Brightebank sounds as if it ought to be a pretty place—is it pretty?" Margaret asked, for the first time showing any interest in the details of her inheritance.

"Yes, very pretty indeed—beautiful! That is to say it was so once," replied the lawyer. Sylvan Holt had risen and walked away to the window, and Margaret, now following him, slipped her hand through his arm and began to whisper inquiries about it.

"Father, did you and my mother live at Brightebank? Do you know, I have a curiosity to see it if you did."

"Only for a short time, Maggie; you were born there, but the place is all gone to destruction now," was the hurried answer.

Margaret would have liked to ask further if her mother had died there, but some inexplicable reserve withheld her. She had never in her life—not even when she was a little child—heard her mother's name pass her father's lips.

"Now we will release you for this morning," said Mr. Meddowes; "you have been much more patient than I anticipated."

"Don't catechise me as to how much I recollect," laughed Margaret, taking her dismissal in good part. "Now, Oscar, we will have our walk. Father, we shall go to Oakfield and inflict on Mrs. Joan Clervaux a second-hand edition of this disagreeable news."

"So be it, darling, and as you will be close to Beckford, go forward, and ask Tibbie Ryder if there are any letters for us."

Margaret promised not to forget, and having donned her hat and maud, at the sight of which Oscar testified renewed confidence in the strange gentleman, she set off down by the woodside, speculating on what Mrs. Joan would say to her strange tidings.

For herself the facts she had been listening to were still mystical and shadowy; it was impossible to tell yet what influence they might exercise over the future, but having a taste and fancy naturally luxurious, the possession of great wealth sounded pleasant; though there was something too unreal about this to challenge much enjoyment. There was, however, a little agreeable excitement in her mind till she thought how happy, how contented she had been up at Wildwood. Could she be happier elsewhere? She was satisfied with her simple cambric dress, her plaid and straw hat—what could jewels and fine clothing do for her more? She loved liberty—her wild rambles by wood and hill in fair weather and foul—would she be as free encompassed with what her father had designated burdens? Her educational deficiencies, her lack of accomplishments, rose up before her in spectral guise. She saw herself in imagination an ignorant, unpolished country girl, an anomaly amongst those gay and brilliant women whom Colonel Fielding had expressly said he *liked*. Even if it were possible to modify her defects, how hard were the means! disliking all serious application, and unfitted by her peculiar training for any life but that she had hitherto led. It was true that she

possessed a natural refinement and a delicacy of taste which would keep her safe from all glaring mistakes were she thrown into that gay world she so coveted to see, but still she was as different from the carefully tended and highly cultivated flowers that grace that world, as is the heather on the moor from the choice exotic.

She was not much of a castle-builder—her life was too active for that—or else as she went on her way she might have been beguiled into laying out a splendid future for herself; neither had she forgotten that her father had said these burdens would not come upon her until he was *gone*—a word of such fearful import as to cloud over all beyond in thick darkness; but happily her mind and frame were elastic and healthy enough to be able to shake off mere shadowy forebodings, and to preserve their vital strength to meet the shock of the real trial when its time should come—and already, while she was singing though the fir-tree glade as blithely as if Abbeymead, Rushfall and Brightebank had never existed—the vague, secret cloud which had invisibly pervaded all her life past was gathering, gathering swiftly into storm to burst without warning upon her head.

CHAPTER XXII.

MARGARET SEEKS ADVICE.

MRS. JOAN CLERVAUX was busy in her green-house when Margaret reached Oakfield, so she went to her there, and seated herself on the steps to take a little breath and courage before opening her budget of news. The old lady made many kind inquiries about Sylvan Holt's return, his appearance and health, and then ran on to communicate her own great event of the morning, without noticing the restless excitement of her young favourite's manner.

"You will be glad to hear, Gipsy, that I have received a letter from Martin Carew—he was to sail yesterday," said she with her usual cheerfulness; "there are affectionate messages to a certain wild young maiden of his acquaintance—but per-

haps you would like to read them for yourself?" and she gave her the closely written epistle to peruse while she went on tying up her plants, snipping off withered buds and leaves, and altering the position of here and there an ornamental flower-pot or basket. Margaret eagerly received the letter and read it twice through, remarking as she came to the end of it the second time, that Martin seemed to have gone in very good spirits.

"Yes, and that is cheering to reflect on," replied Mrs. Joan. "I begin to think that I may live to see him come home again with well won distinctions. I have great faith in Martin—he is a very fine character, Gipsy—impulsive but generous, is he not?"

Margaret acquiesced, and thought she had better enter on her own affairs, but put it off again and only said :

"That is a beautiful rose that you are removing, Mrs. Joan ; is it a new one? I don't remember to have seen it here before."

"Yes, my love, it is a new one, and a very rare one too ; its perfume is exquisite. John sent it from Walham yesterday. You shall have the first slip if you like."

"Thanks. My basket looks very gay now with the geraniums and azaleas you were so kind as to send me."

"Has the crimson rose that you and Martin Carew planted by the porch up at the Grange struck well?"

"Yes, it will be a strong tree by and by : it looks very hardy."

"I expected you earlier—what have you been doing all the long morning? Walking with your father or busy in-doors?"

"Busy in-doors with my father and Mr. Meddowes—Jacky and I were vastly surprised when he arrived with a stranger, you may be sure : Jacky was very wroth too—for she could not devise him a bed anywhere but on the lang-settle in the house place."

"Mr. Meddowes here!" said Mrs. Joan, in a tone of anxious surprise. "Do you know what he has come about?"

"Yes. If you will leave your flowers for a little while I will try to tell you all about it—I don't know that you will think it very important, though it sounds so." Margaret laughed as she spoke, and made room for her old friend beside her on the steps.

"Anything that concerns you is always important to me, Gipsy—well, out with this mighty secret!" responded Mrs. Joan, gaily; at the first mention of Meddowes she had rapidly changed colour at some premonitory suspicion in her own mind, but she had as quickly recovered her countenance on glancing at Margaret's flushed but happy face, and seeing in it no signs of trouble.

"Mrs. Joan, do you think me fit to be a rich heiress? that is what Mr. Meddowes tells me I am," said she, bending down shyly.

The old lady breathed a sigh of intense relief which rather puzzled Margaret.

"A rich heiress!" she echoed, "a rich heiress! Well, Gipsy, perhaps the idea might have startled me if it had been a new one, but I have known it a long time."

"Oh, have you! then why did you not warn me of my future position, and tell me how miserably deficient I should be in it? I think it would frighten me if I dared to look it straight in the face. I am sure I wish it had befallen anybody but me."

"You will wear to it after a while—but it will make no immediate difference to you, will it?"

"No, except that I must make up for lost time. Tell me what I must do! Oh, I wish these were the days of fairies and wishing-wells—I would go and wish to become all at once as clever and accomplished as I should like to be."

Mrs. Joan could not forbear smiling at her earnestness.

"Oh, Gipsy, there is no royal road to learning for you, more's the pity!" said she; "nothing but plod, plod, over the sharp stones of difficulty. But how old are you? seventeen I think."

"I shall be eighteen next May."

"That is nearly a year off: still, I think you are too old to be sent away to school."

"Oh yes; and besides I could not leave my father—that is impossible!"

"But do you *really* mean to set to work, Gipsy? really and truly? You have been going to begin so long that I am afraid I have not much faith in your good resolutions."

Margaret reflected a moment or two with a rather serious countenance, and then said:

"I feel that I must—but how? Who will teach me?"

"I think we can supply the teacher readily enough if the

pupil be only forthcoming at due time and seasons. You were apt to be a little restive and unpunctual with me sometimes, if you remember, Gipsy?"

"Yes," said Margaret, without much evidence of contrition; "yes, I was. I did not see the necessity of study then, but lately I have begun to feel ashamed of my ignorance; and now this sudden announcement of what I must do and bear some day shows me all my incapacity at once. I cannot play or speak any language but my own, and who but you or my father would care to hear me sing? Then as for my drawing, much as I like it, what can I do? When we have said that I can read and write, we have said all—and every poor girl in Beckford can do that."

"The end of education is not mere display, Gipsy; recollect that, and don't be discouraged. Comparisons are in general odious things, but I will make one for your comfort. Hundreds of pounds and years of drilling have been spent over Bell Rowley, yet she is in every point your inferior; she has not a good natural capacity, but she is inflated with conceit, and at the same time she lacks the common-sense to put to the best use what has been instilled into her with so much labour and sorrow. She is thorough in nothing, but is just an idle gossiping fine lady with exuberant spirits and an indefatigable tongue. I prefer my ignorant little Gipsy a thousand fold!"

"That is your partiality; you love me, and you do not love Bell Rowley."

"My child, I do love you dearly, but I am not blind to your deficiencies, and I tell you honestly that nothing but hard work and diligence will ever make them up. There has been one thing in your favour fortunately—you have always had a taste for reading which has put a miscellaneous store of facts into your mind—then I think you do know something substantial of history and geography."

"You have endeavoured to teach me, and so has my father," said Margaret ruefully.

"Yes, and though you were careless enough, you could not be stupid if you tried, so that in spite of yourself you did learn something."

"But I never shall be like other women, never while I live!"

"I don't think you will, Gipsy, so you must even be content to abide in your own distinct and separate identity."

"I wish I knew a little of German and Italian, or of French.

Colonel Fielding spoke to me of Schiller's Mary Stuart and of Petrarch's sonnets, but I knew nothing about them except what I had read in that biographical dictionary you once lent me."

"You must have translations, Gipsy. I am afraid it would be too arduous a task for you, with your habits, to begin learning foreign languages now; they are learnt best and most easily early, for there is a great deal of gradual up-hill work before you can enjoy a book in a strange tongue. If you were accustomed to application it might be different, but you are not."

"Translations do not seem a fair way of knowing an author, but still it is so vacant to be ignorant of what clever people talk every day."

"Where did you pick up the idea that clever people talk of Schiller and Petrarch every day? My dear, they talk about their neighbours' business, and settle the affairs of the nation, just like the rest of us. There is something angular and fussy in clever women that I don't admire, generally speaking, and I suspect that when you talk about *clever* you mean much more than that hard sounding word ever did. Lady Rowley is a clever woman and Mrs. Wilmot is a clever woman—do you wish to resemble them?"

"No, decidedly no!" replied Margaret with energy, "I would rather be like that Geraldine Favell, of whom I have heard you speak, than any one else."

"Ah yes! Geraldine Favell was a very lovely, graceful, accomplished woman, and how her son venerates her? Did Colonel Fielding ever mention his mother to you, Gipsy?"

"No." There was a sudden rise of colour in Margaret's cheek, and she began carelessly to twitch off the leaves of a beautiful myrtle that stood by her in a flower-basket, without knowing in the least what she was doing.

"I cannot have my plants spoilt, let those mischievous fingers rest," said Mrs. Joan, drawing away her hand and holding it fast. "Now let us finish our discussion of the educational scheme—What do you say to a governess?"

"But who would live up at Wildwood except ourselves? And besides, I am sure my father would never consent to have a stranger in the house."

"I never supposed he would: but I think she might lodge at Mill Cottage, where the curate used to do; and, as you heed neither wind nor weather in your walks, you might go down to her every morning after breakfast. I believe I know the lady

to suit you—it is a Mrs. Sinclair who educated my brother John's girls. She is both clever and accomplished, and what is of more importance still, she is a pious good woman, whose friendship may be a stay to you all the days of your life."

"But do you think she will venture to undertake me when she hears how I have been brought up?" asked Margaret dubiously.

"It will be an Herculean task; but she is not easily daunted. I think we must consult her about you."

"Let me tell my father and Mr. Meddowes first. Oh! Mrs. Joan, I wish I had taken your advice and worked when I was younger—I cannot understand why my father would bring me up like a boy, and why he never told me before what I have learnt to-day."

"Don't come to me for explanations, Gipsy," replied Mrs. Joan uneasily, and she made haste to change the subject by asking if Margaret had observed in reading Martin Carew's letter that he had sent her a paint-box to use in remembrance of him.

"Yes, I am so glad of it! it will be a charming resource now that summer is come."

"It arrived by the carrier last night, so if you come into the drawing-room you can take possession at once. The dear lad sent me a new blotting book also, and I have been making use of it in answering his letter."

"Is your letter sealed up yet, Mrs. Joan?"

"No, my love, it is not—there it lies on the table if you wish to send him a few lines of thanks."

Margaret first inspected the paint-box, and then seating herself at the writing table scribbled a half-sheet full of news, and put it into the envelope, and that done she said she must be going again, as she had to ask at Beckford for her father's letters. Mrs. Joan did not try to keep her, as it was his first day at home, but made her promise to repeat her visit on the morrow, and bring word how the proposal for her education was received; and Margaret, who was really eager to have some plan arranged for herself as soon as possible, said she would not fail to commend Mrs. Sinclair at home, and that she believed her father would readily consent to whatever she now desired.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BAD STORY.

TIBBIE RYDER was standing outside the cottage door, cleaning her lantern, and talking to it in true witch fashion, as Margaret Holt drew near to the gate. The old woman examined her dress with an astonished, inquisitorial eye, and then went forward to meet her, saying :

"There's no letters for t' Grange at all, honey ;" then she added hastily, lest Margaret should escape before she could get the question out ; "Ha' you gotten your father back yet, Miss Marg'ret?"

"Yes, he arrived last night. Are you quite sure there is nothing for us, Tibbie?"

"Wad I tell you there wasn't if there was? You suld knaw Tibbie Ryder by this time! Don't take no offence, Miss Marg'ret, but I must say I am surprised you ha' not putten on mourning: not so much as a black ribbon on your hat?"

"Put on mourning, Tibbie? For whom should I put on mourning?" said Margaret, flushing violently.

"Why, for your mother, bairn—she's only just dead. It doesn't look natural o' her ain child to show no respect, though we don't say t' poor lady was all she ought to ha' been, either to you or Sylvan Holt."

Margaret stared at the old woman as if she doubted whether she heard aright, but her lips turned ashen pale, as she said at last—

"Tibbie, I don't at all understand what you mean—what do you know of my mother?"

"Then your father an't told you? He ought to, no matter what she was. Why, bairn, your mother died about three weeks since," said Tibbie, heartily wishing she had held her tongue, for her information had been obtained in the usual irregular manner.

"I always thought she had died when I was a little baby," gasped Margaret.

Tibbie was now thoroughly scared for the consequences of her indiscretion, and she did not make her position better by what she said next.

"You'll remember walking down for t' letters that day Mr. Carew came to Oakfield—no, it was the day after—an' Miss Bell Rowley rode by while you was here. You got a furren letter—it was for your father. Well, it was that brought t' news. She'd just died, it said, an' would he go over to her burying. It was i' France——"

"Then you had opened that letter, Tibbie!" said Margaret, instantaneously joining the whole thread of circumstances which had preceded her father's sudden departure from the Grange. "What more do you know?"

"Nought, bairn, nought! Is it for me to be in folks' private concerns?" cried Tibbie, with an injured air, but trembling violently.

"It appears, Tibbie, that you do pry, or you could not have told me what you have done. Tell me all you know."

"Oh, Miss Margaret, don't go to get me into trouble! T' letter came open i' my hand, an' I sealed it up again."

"What more do you know, Tibbie, I insist upon hearing? I do not believe the letter came open: you opened it, and swore it had not been touched."

"I've telled you all I can, bairn; go to Mrs. Joan Clervaux—happen she'll know more," Tibbie returned, very humbly and fearfully.

Margaret was so struck, so paralysed by the shock of this wholly unexpected intelligence and the manner of its communication, that she stood for a considerable time beating with her foot upon the ground, but quite silent, while Tibbie Ryder waited her departure, wishing herself well out of the dilemma into which her talkative, gossiping, prying tricks had led her. At length, without again speaking, Margaret turned away and walked slowly towards Oakfield—all the previous conversation of the morning quite obliterated by the event she had just learnt. Mrs. Joan Clervaux was still busy amongst her plants in the greenhouse when Margaret appeared before her, but at a glance the old lady saw that something was greatly amiss with her favourite, and hastily dropping her scissors and gardening gloves, she took her by the hand, and brought her indoors.

Margaret would not sit down, but leaning against the side of the window opposite to Mrs. Joan's couch, she began by asking—

"Mrs. Joan, do you know anything of my mother?" The

poor girl's lips quivered, and her frank beautiful eyes were downcast with shame and pain. Mrs. Joan looked away from her, much troubled, but she did not immediately answer. "Whatever you know tell me," persisted Margaret, bending her head down as if she were cowering from a blow. Still Mrs. Joan was silent. "Why don't you speak? Oh, tell me, do tell me about her if you know!" implored the stricken girl passionately.

"My dear love, I do know, but you have been a happy child in your ignorance; don't begin to crave already for sorrowful wisdom."

"Tibbie Ryder opened a letter to my father and read it: she just now betrayed herself by telling me that it brought intelligence of my mother's death: and summoned him to her burial. I want to know why I have been suffered to believe she died when I was a baby, while she has been living abroad, and is but a few weeks since dead? Why was she not with us at Wildwood?"

"Margaret, you are so ignorant of the world that I can scarcely bear to tell you the sad, miserable history! She did die to you, Gipsy, when you were a little baby, for she abandoned you." Mrs. Joan paused, and the scarlet flew into Margaret's face; there was so much uprightness and pride in her character that to have learnt her mother's name was a dishonour stung her to the quick. She put up her hand to cover her eyes, and said in a low, hoarse voice—

"Go on, tell me everything—was she so wicked?"

"She was very sinful and guilty. Yes, Gipsy, if I speak at all I must speak plainly—she was very guilty. I dare not excuse her to spare you, lest I should seem to put wrong for right, and she was without excuse. But her punishment overtook her soon, and it has been very long and very sore."

"And did my father love her?"

"Oh! Margaret, the life he has led since she disgraced him may tell you how he loved her! I believe it has been one weary passage of longing and remorse, for he has never felt himself clear towards her. He ought never to have married her."

"Tell me all that too. How was it?"

"It is strange to speak to you, Gipsy, of these things," replied Mrs. Joan, uttering every word with visible reluctance. "It would be happier to keep your ignorance, dear love."

Give me leave to be silent—if you bid me speak, I must speak so harshly.”

“Tell me all the truth; I know the worst already, but I want explanation,” replied Margaret, impetuously.

“Oh, child, child! it can give you nothing but pain: it is so utterly sad, so utterly hopeless!”

“Well, speak! I cannot breathe till you have told me all: do speak, in pity—nothing can be worse than this cruel silence!”

“Then let me be brief, Gipsy; though to make it clear to you I must begin from the first germ of evil.” She paused a moment as if collecting her strength for the task, and then proceeded in a low hurried voice: “Your mother’s affections were already engaged when your father met her, but her family was ambitious that she should make a wealthy marriage, and she was weak and foolish enough to imagine that luxury would compensate her for the absence of love; so she yielded to her friends’ importunities; and, discarding her cousin, to whom she was attached, married Sylvan Holt, whom she positively hated. You shudder, Margaret; but oh! it was true, she has confessed it since with floods of unavailing tears. She was then a very beautiful, very lovely, fascinating woman, wedded to pleasure and every worldly frivolity, and for a time the scope her husband’s indulgence gave to her extravagance supplied the vacuum in her mind left by the loss of her betrayed love. You were born, and for a few months she was induced to live at Brightebank in a pleasant retirement, but this soon became wearisome to her. She desired to go to Paris, and your father for the first time thwarted her: he had discovered with bitterness that he had no share in his wife’s heart, and he began to fear both for her and for himself. Sylvan Holt was a terrible man to offend; you may judge, Margaret, how violent would be his hatred to one whom he suspected, and he suspected his unhappy wife’s cousin of still pursuing her.”

Mrs. Joan paused, as if from sheer inability to proceed; Margaret had never stirred or uncovered her face, only now and then she drew a long gasping breath, as if she were suffocating. After a few minutes’ silence Mrs. Joan recommenced:

“You can guess, Gipsy, that it was then she abandoned you—a tiny nursling that she had not yet taught to lisp her name! Oh, it was cruel; it was cold to you, her innocent little baby! Sylvan Holt’s fell anger rose to its climax. He neither ate nor

slept until he had tracked the wretched pair to their hiding-place. Margaret, your father killed him in her presence!"

Margaret suddenly let fall her hand from her burning face—"It was just," said she, with stern vehemence: "*just!*"

Mrs. Joan was startled at the transformation in her countenance—a little while ago so bright and innocent but now fevered and contracted with passion. But she did not attempt to reason with her yet; she went on sorrowfully with her story, herself almost abashed beneath the fixed gaze that Margaret kept upon her face:

"Your father was arrested and tried in Paris for the murder——"

"It was *not* murder!" interrupted Margaret, fiercely. "Who said that righteous vengeance was *murder?*"

"The law so regarded it, but by reason of the extenuating circumstances he was only condemned to two years' imprisonment."

The poor girl drew a long shuddering breath through her clenched teeth, and cowered down upon the floor crying out of the bitterness of her heart—

"Oh, my father, my father!"

"When that period expired," continued Mrs. Joan, "he came up, a stranger, to Wildwood, bringing you with him. During the time of his detention in France you were left under the care of a nurse at Abbeymeads; she married when you were taken from her. Your unhappy mother had sustained such a terrible shock by the death of her cousin in those awful circumstances that for several years she was obliged to be kept under restraint: but, afterwards, partially recovering, she was transferred to the care of a physician where she still was when I last heard of her. But I do not think she was ever quite herself again."

"She is dead now! yes, she is dead!" exclaimed Margaret rising from the floor, and standing erect; "and Tibbie Ryder asked me why I had not put on mourning for her—not so much as a black ribbon on my hat! Oh! I do not mourn for her, not I! I wish she had died when I was born, that I might have thought of her at least without a blush!" There was a hard unnatural vehemence in her voice and manner painfully shocking to her old friend, down whose withered cheeks the tears flowed abundantly as she went on in the same tone; "Oh! Mrs. Joan, this dishonour falls very heavily on me; my

father's life wrecked—everything of happiness destroyed. I had always thought of my mother with such a sacred love: once I saw her picture. Oh, yes, it was beautiful! There can be nothing more lovely! but I would have trampled it under my feet if I had known what I know now!"

"Oh! hush, Gipsy, hush, my love! You are speaking of her who gave you life—and she repented sorely before she died!"

"Gave me life only to dishonour it! No, I will not think of her with tenderness any more! Look at my father. I understand now all that was so mysterious before: I know why we have been hidden at Wildwood—because we were ashamed to front the world! Abbeymeads, Rushfall, Brightebank—what need I think of them for? gladly would I exchange them all for an untainted name. A rich heiress! 'Poor girl,' people will say, when they see how ignorant and strange I am, 'Poor girl, no wonder; she has been worse than motherless! *worse* than motherless!'"

Mrs. Joan endeavoured to say something to cool her passion, but Margaret would not listen; "Let me go now and take my misery out of sight!" said she, shivering from head to foot; "I do not think I can ever feel like my old happy self again!" Though she said she was going, she still lingered, and there was a silence of several minutes, after which she added, in a lower and softened tone, "You have known this terrible blot all along, Mrs. Joan, and yet you have neither despised nor avoided me."

"Oh, no, Gipsy! I have loved you very dearly, and so will others love you too."

Margaret stood a short time longer gazing out at the sky and trees with hot tearless eyes: then she shook hands and stepped from the glass door upon the lawn. Mrs. Joan would walk down the avenue with her as far as the gate.

"Come to me again soon, my child, you need comfort," said the old lady kindly: "I will try to be a mother to you."

"Oh! don't use that name to me ever again—it has no holy meaning to me!" cried Margaret, trembling all over; "be to me what you have always been,—my very kind old friend." Mrs. Joan was deeply touched, though the poor girl seemed like flint. "Does Martin Carew know?" she asked suddenly.

"No, my love, I am sure he does not. The circumstances happened abroad and are of such old date that probably few persons are aware of them. Your father confided them to me,

that when the opportunity came I might relieve him of the task of telling you. He desired that you should know them when you grew up, but he dreaded speaking to you himself."

"How shall I meet him when I go home now? I cannot act a part even if I would."

"There is no need, Gipsy; this is the explanation he promised when he left you. As soon as he sees your face he will know that you have heard it, and that it has taught you a hard lesson of humiliation."

"Oh, Mrs. Joan! of degradation, of abasement, rather. When any one looks at me I shall think he reads it in my face."

"Come down and talk with me to-morrow—your father can spare you better now he has the company of Mr. Meddowes."

"I should like to hide myself and be forgotten—or else to forget all the misery and disgrace that have come upon me to-day."

"You must not be morbidly sensitive, my dear love; carry your trouble to God. I see you cannot bear more now, so good-bye."

"Good-bye!" And Margaret went slowly along under the hedge like some poor wounded thing trailing itself painfully out of human sight. There was hot anger and keen resentment in her heart, but no throb of sorrow, no pulse of pity, for her miserable dead mother. Her father's sufferings and wrongs, the dark shadow overcasting her own life, were vivid as letters of fire, but the long tear-washed repentance of her whose sins had caused all, was unrealized to her mind. Before her wrathful imagination, suddenly matured and quickened, there arose a picture of that beautiful voluptuous woman who had first sacrificed an honest love for a legal prostitution, and, too late, sickening of her hollow life, had fled from its cold decorum into an abyss of irremediable guilt.

None are such stern judges as the young and pure: they have not stood in the furnace-blast of strong temptation, and because their innocence is untried, they regard it as impregnable. Margaret was very harsh and cruel while she thought herself merely just; at this period she felt that she could not, and *ought* not to forgive her sinful mother, and she nursed her anger in her heart as a righteous anger.

When she came to the stile at Wildfoot, she saw her father and Mr. Meddowes pacing to and fro the grass in front of the

house. She could not bear to meet either of them then, so turning on her steps, she made a detour through the woods, which brought her out close to the back of the Grange. The heavy rains of the previous day and night had left the long grasses wet, and the leaf-mould soft and soaked, but the trees were refreshed, and the foliage trembled with a revived lustre and beauty. In the open glades the sweet breath of the wild honeysuckle which wreathed its garlands from branch to branch, was scenting the air, and dull as was the day, and heavy as were the clouds, the little bird songsters were far from silent. Oscar, as if sensible of his dear mistress's trouble, stalked solemnly along beside her, occasionally pushing his nose against her hand or turning a wistful eye upwards to catch hers; but Margaret was too absorbed to have either word or look for her noble favourite. On reaching home she went straight to her own room, unseen by either Jacky or her father, and there shut herself in to ponder on her great calamity.

As dinner-time drew near, she was forced to contemplate the necessity of meeting her father. She heard Jacky say in passing from the kitchen to the parlour: "Marg'ret's awa' to Oakfield; we'll see her no more till night fa'"; and then she heard her father reply: "She must have returned through the wood and gone up to her room, for there is Oscar lying asleep in the porch." Soon after, Jacky came to the stair's foot and called out—

"Marg'ret, are you there? T' dinner's ready."

A sensation of deadly faintness came over her, and she saw a white face—white *mask*, rather—reflected in the glass which she scarcely recognised as her own.

"I must not go down looking like that, my father would be so startled," she said to herself; and she did not respond to Jacky's summons, hoping they would think she had stayed down at Oakfield while Oscar had come home alone. But Sylvan Holt mounted and knocked at her door, asking—

"Maggie, are you here?"

She immediately opened it, and bade him come in. For a minute they confronted each other in silence, then Margaret said, in a tone that sounded fierce and harsh while it trembled—

"Father, I have heard my mother's story to-day." Sylvan Holt groaned, and his eyes fell before hers. "Yea, and I lis-

tened to it as you must know I should, with shame and anger," she went on. "Oh! she was cruel, she was wicked! I understand our solitude now. Father, why are these tears in your eyes?"

"Because I loved her, Maggie, and she is dead. Say nothing of her now but what is pitying and compassionate."

"I can neither weep nor mourn for her! I would rather weep for you and for myself that we must bear the dishonour she earned."

"I wish you had gone with me, Margaret; then you would have felt that all the anguish has not been ours."

"But all the sin was hers."

"Let God judge between us! I was harsh and angry and she had never loved me: perhaps, if I had been more gentle she had not fallen. If you had seen her poor dead face as I saw it, you would have been constrained to forgive, even as I forgave her; it was so worn and channelled with tears, and her hair was like that of a very, very old woman."

"Oh! dear father, do not speak so of her! I do not desire to think of her like that. I have seen her picture in your room, and when I recall it my heart is hardened against her. She does not merit that I should be sorrowful for her sorrow, and I will not."

"My feeling was once the same as yours, child, and it was far more bitter than this present grief. Can she hear us, Maggie—do you think the spirits of our dead are conscious of our regrets?" and as he spoke Sylvan Holt looked up to the slaty sky.

"Oh! if she can indeed hear us let her know that the child she abandoned spurns at her in her grave!" cried Margaret passionately. "She had no mother's heart that could leave me as she did! Father, how old was I when she forsook me?"

"You were but a tender little baby, scarcely a year old, Maggie—but speak gently of her for my sake."

There was a crimson spot burning on the girl's cheek, and the natural relief of tears did not come to her.

"For your sake, father, I will keep silence; but never ask me to forgive her: never bid me remember her as mother of mine," said she hardly; "I have no mother—no mother living or dead! As she dishonoured me, I disown her."

"You cannot drain her blood from your veins, and she did

love you, Maggie; she loved you dearly," interrupted Sylvan Holt. "I well remember how very tender she was over you to the last: how she fondled you, how she caressed and kissed your baby limbs the day she left us. It was *me* she hated—you she fondly loved."

"I will not believe it! She had not even the animal attachment to her young that might have kept her to guard its helplessness."

"Oh! child, child! You cannot understand all the struggle. I will tell you: she wearied me with petitions, year by year, that I would let her see you only once before she died, but I said no, no—she should never living behold your face again. And when she was dead, Maggie, then I repented. You were her own child; you had lain on her heart when she was pure; you were, indeed, her only sinless love; and I had kept you from her. When I saw her in her coffin she seemed to ask me for you still. I had never thought of her wasting sorrow, never once. I still remembered her beautiful and defiant—and oh! the ghastly change! Maggie, be gentle on her memory, there may be many sorrows and temptations in God's hand to try you."

"Speak of it no more, father, it does not touch me: my heart is petrified against her now and for ever. May God forget me in my trouble if I forget our cruel wrongs! Give me your hand—let me kiss it—it has no murder stain for me: *there*, father, you did justly—there you wrought retribution," and as she spoke, Margaret grasped his hard hand and pressed it to her lips.

Sylvan Holt drew it away;

"My conscience does not smite me for that deed—but sometimes, *sometimes* I am haunted by a wish that he had lived," said he hoarsely: "it comes upon me in the dead of the night, and I see him as he fell, clasping her knees and crying 'Kiss me, Maddie, kiss me, I am dying!' and she clung to him like a crazed creature, and *cursed* me—She loved him, Margaret, and it was I who came between them."

Margaret's countenance was set like marble, but her eyes glittered:

"I say, father, if you had destroyed her too, you had but done justice," cried she sternly. "But let us cease—that past is beyond our undoing. Will you leave me?"

Sylvan Holt stood for a few minutes hesitating with his hand

on the lock, and then went silently out. Margaret did not quit her room again that day; and when Jacky came up towards evening to bring her her tea she refused to see her or to receive the food. A violent natural instinct it was that possessed her, a savage instinct, a heathen instinct: a mingling of repulsion for her mother's sin and compassion for her father's fate that had no germ of Christian forgiveness or love in it. Her pride was abased, her honour was laid low; in fancy, she saw the finger of scorn pointing at her as worthy of all contumely, or the eye of curiosity scanning her features for some trait of resemblance to the poor, lost wretch lying in her dishonoured foreign grave.

It was bitterer than gall to Margaret's upright spirit to feel herself surrounded with this atmosphere of obloquy, and the more she dwelt upon it the denser it grew. It appeared to enfold her as in a mantle which every one seeing must recognise. One moment she would sit silent, heavy, shrinking within its darkness as the Israelites of old shrank into their mourning sackcloth; the next, she would rise with head erect and dilating eyes as if she flung it from her disdainfully, and felt only the white raiment of her own maiden purity!

It was a species of frenzy that hurried her to and fro all that day and all that night. The poor young creature, new to all true grief, raved, rebelled, and sickened over her calamity as the inexperienced do sicken over a sorrow that looks so indefinitely vast as to darken all the future and even heaven itself to their eyes.

"What shall I do, how shall I bear it?" was her cry at one time; then she grew defiant and dreary; but soon the miserable reality came back, crushing her into the dust of humiliation, and covering her head with its ashes.

"She thought she could never hold up her face again without a burning blush of agonizing shame, and if God had taken her at her word then, she might have died in the bloom of her beautiful youth. But he did not: He mercifully left her to learn how cunning a dresser of our wounds is slowly moving Time, and to gather her share of the good out of the lottery of human life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MARGARET'S TRIAL.

MR. MEDDOWES had conceived an admiring, paternal regard for Margaret Holt but he disapproved highly of the spirit in which she had received the history of her unhappy mother's disgrace and death, and determined to take her to task about it on the first opportunity. This opportunity was not long in offering itself. Since the miserable day when the blow fell, Margaret had given up her out-door rambles entirely; instead of betaking herself to the moors or wood, she used to shut herself up with Oscar in the deserted winter parlour, and only came out when summoned by Jacky to her meals. Sylvan Holt made no attempt to draw her back to her old amusements, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux reasoned with her in vain; a sullen resentment seemed to have got complete possession of her, and there was no sign that she endeavoured to struggle against it.

One morning that Sylvan Holt was gone round his farm alone, Tibbie Ryder brought up a letter for Margaret, and Jacky, who was becoming shy of intruding on her young mistress in her angry mood, carried it into the summer parlour and laid it down there to wait her coming out of her retreat. As soon as Meddowes saw it, the idea occurred to him that it might furnish an auspicious introduction for his lecture, so he took it in his hand and went to the door of the room where she was and knocked. As there was no answer he opened it and entered. Margaret was sitting on the floor beside the window, with her arm round Oscar's neck crying bitterly. This was the first time she had wept since her trouble came, and there was more violence than softening in her sorrow. Meddowes hesitated a moment or two, and then approached her and laid the letter on her lap. She started, and wiped her eyes, but neither moved nor spoke; a convulsive sobbing shook her whole frame, and when she had broken the seal of her letter she could scarcely read it for her fast-rising tears. The lawyer half-repenting him of his voluntary office, for Job's comforters were not more miserable ones than he, but laying sudden hold on his retreating courage, he said :

"You will have some news to carry down to Oakfield to-day if, as I suspect, your letter is from Mrs. Joan Clervaux's nephew."

"Anty can take the letter—I am not going out," replied Margaret.

Meddowes was not very sure of the temperament with which he had to deal, and it was several moments before he ventured to suggest that the walk would cheer her spirits and do her good. Margaret was silent, and this emboldened him to plunge into his subject without further circumlocution.

"My dear, I want a little serious talk with you," said he, placing himself on the window-seat opposite to her; "we see nothing of you now, and your father is beginning to be deeply distressed about you—do you think you are acting rightly when you cause him pain on your account?"

Margaret looked up with a startled expression, and her lips quivered, but she did not speak.

"It is the case, indeed," added the lawyer; "when you left us this morning after breakfast he said to me, 'Meddowes, I am uneasy for my poor child, she takes this sad affair more to heart than I anticipated.' My dear, it is a very grievous matter, but it is past and it is irreparable. Three lives have fallen a sacrifice to it, as one may say, and it is enough; yours is too precious to be lost in miserable and vain regrets. Look the calamity frankly in the face, and ask yourself, what can you alter of it? Nothing, absolutely nothing! Then be wise, and endeavour to become your charming self again—why cause your father an anxiety that he is ill able to bear? You have been the only solace of his life for these fourteen years back, and what will be the consequences if you are now to become a care instead of a blessing to him, I dare not attempt to think."

Margaret was still silent, but she seemed stirred out of her self-concentrated moodiness, and listened without apathy.

"We were speaking of your neglected education one day, if you recollect," resumed Meddowes, equally pleased and surprised at the effect of his exhortation, "let us return to the consideration of it now. I should earnestly counsel you to give your mind employment, and so draw it away from the contemplation of these disastrous events. Have you spoken to Mrs. Joan Clervaux yet about yourself? if not, advise with her to-day: carry Mr. Carew's letter down to Oakfield this morning, and ask her what must be done."

Margaret was now obliged to open her lips, and after the first few tremulous words, she recovered herself so far as to be able to detail what had passed between her old friend and herself on the subject—but she was far from showing the same interest in it as she had done when it was broached at Oakfield.

"I know Mrs. Sinclair well," said Meddowes, "and I think she will develop admirably as a counter-irritant."

Margaret did not know what he meant, neither did she care to think; she only rose from the floor and asked if he knew where her father was, for she wanted to go to him.

"I dare say he is down in the horse-pasture—he was saying that you must not lose your rides, and that he would have that beautiful little brown mare, Mayblossom, trained for you; he may be about it now," replied the lawyer, satisfied that he had done a very good morning's work, and cheerful accordingly.

Margaret called Oscar and went out into the hall, where, after a little loitering and hesitation, she put on her hat and plaid, and sped off rapidly down towards the horse-pasture.

"She will do now," thought Meddowes, "but no doubt, the shock was tremendous to that high spirit—still, when the virulence of the sting to her pride is abated and her passion goes off, there is so much feminine pliability about her that it will not leave any lasting effects. We will have the governess and set her to work—but she is so startled about her father that I do not think she will relapse into the sullen again. Now, I'll pack my carpet-bag, and get back to town as fast as I can. I would not spend another week here, if Sylvan Holt would give me Wildwood Grange and all it contains!"

Margaret found her father employed as Meddowes had suggested—Anty, wearing an old skirt of her own, was riding Mayblossom up and down the pasture in beautiful style; Mayblossom was own sister to Crosspatch, and like her in everything except a white star on her forehead and a better temper. Sylvan Holt went to meet his daughter as soon as he saw her, and then for ever so long they stood to watch the mare's manœuvring; Margaret's face brightened unconsciously into an expression of interest, and she looked positively pleased when her father said that in a week's time Mayblossom would be fit for her to mount. While they were still talking, the twelve o'clock bell rang, and as they returned to the Grange, Margaret told her father of the conversation she had had with Meddowes, and

previously with Mrs. Joan Clervaux, relative to her education. The notion of a governess did not, at first sound, seem very acceptable to him, and Margaret added that she had ceased to care about it herself, but afterwards when he came to discuss it with the lawyer he was brought round to his way of thinking; and Mrs. Joan Clervaux being furnished with plenary powers, not many days were suffered to elapse before Mrs. Sinclair was domiciled for a permanency at Mill Cottage.

Mrs. Sinclair proved to be a penetrating, vivacious woman, full of spirit and activity—one of those plain, common-sensical people who will never give to any circumstance more than its due weight. She had the art of attracting confidence, and Margaret fortunately took a liking to her at their first interview, which liking soon became mutual. It was not long before she freely unbosomed herself of her misgivings on her own portentous state of ignorance, summing up the case briefly in the following pithy sentences:

"I have everything to learn; I know literally nothing of what is made of most account in girls' education; I dare say you will regret you have undertaken me when you begin to find out how densely ignorant I am."

Mrs. Sinclair replied with a promise not to regret if her pupil would begin to be diligent now, and offered her every incentive that could be devised. It was not much in Margaret's way, however, to work steadily, hour after hour and day after day—her first, though secret, motive seemed to be lost sight of altogether, and no secondary one was weighty enough to smooth the rough places on her path. But Mrs. Sinclair had one and only one view of her own duty—she was there to teach and Margaret was there to learn, so she was resolutely and patiently blind to all her freaks of indolence or restiveness, and the more Margaret rebelled, the more she had to do. It was something like breaking in the generous-tempered Mayblossom, for, after a natural degree of chafing against the unaccustomed rule, both gave in and did their duty—if with no high amount of pleasure—at least systematically and well. This parallel was Margaret's own, for when Mrs. Joan Clervaux asked her what account she had to give of herself when she had been about six weeks under Mrs. Sinclair's tuition she replied ruefully enough:

"Oh, Mrs. Joan, I am almost broken in now! The process was very hard and tiresome at first, and sometimes I even thought I must ask my father to let me give it up altogether."

"But you have struggled courageously through at last, and will be glad of it by and by. How long have you lessons daily?"

"Four hours—and afterwards if I have been *good*—don't laugh, Mrs. Joan, I am not always good—Mrs. Sinclair sings and plays to me. Oh, I wish I could play like her! it would be such perfect heartsease!"

"Have you ever tried what you can do?"

"Yes, but I soon gave it up again, for I found that I should never succeed. I hated the feeble pottering noises I made."

"And your drawing, Gipsy?"

"That I enjoy more than anything else, and Mrs. Sinclair tells me for my comfort that I may really hope to make something out of it."

"Any French, any Italian or German?"

"Only translations. Mrs. Sinclair wrote out a long list of books and Mr. Meddowes sent them from town. He is also to forward a monthly parcel of new books—and I read aloud to my father at night, when there is one that suits him."

"And have you much satisfaction in your labours, Gipsy?"

"Sometimes I feel glad that I am trying to do something, but just as often I am discouraged at the slowness of my progress. However, it cannot be helped; I shall never be more than a half-educated, ignorant creature: I wish, twenty times a day, that Abbeymeads and Rushfall were not in existence, or that they did not exist for me."

Margaret one day expressed the same sentiment to Mrs. Sinclair, who rebuked her for it seriously, and bade her consider what good she might do if she was not too indolent and selfish to apply the means.

"I do not know how to do good," was the curt reply.

"But you can learn, I presume. Try to begin at once, and think whether there is not some kind turn you can do in Beckford. You have had a noble example of Christian charity before your eyes all your life in Mrs. Joan Clervaux."

"Yes! but who could be like her? she is one in ten thousand!"

"Your powers will be greater, and that ought to multiply your opportunities. Remember the old adage, 'Where there's a will, there's a way.'"

"I am sure misery has a tendency to make one selfish then; I do not want to help anybody or do anything, but be quiet and out of sight."

Mrs. Sinclair had early discovered what a root of bitterness concerning her mother's sin there lived in the poor girl's heart, and she did her utmost to root it up before it struck its fibres through all her nature; she appealed to her reason, as Mrs. Joan Clervaux had appealed to her feelings, and together they did much to soothe her; but it was no mere human effort that could ever subdue Margaret's wounded, unforgiving pride. Now and then—but this was rarely—she grew impatient of what she called Mrs. Sinclair's "lectures." A reckless fit would come over her, and she would declare she was an outcast—a miserable, disgraced outcast, though by no fault of her own, and that it was no use to slave at tasks she hated! She would stay at Wildwood all her life, and so long as she had her father, her horse, and her dog, what did all the rest of the world signify to her?

"Nothing, perhaps, but you *signify* to yourself," Mrs. Sinclair would reply on these occasions. "You have an active brain that craves food; starve it and it may perish or work you dire mischief. You are in an unhealthy frame of mind just now, and need a tonic."

And the tonic administered was a musical interlude, or a cheerful walk beguiled by pleasant conversation or a visit to Oakfield—usually the most successful of the three, for there is a mighty power of consolation in the presence of any one beloved.

Amongst minor grievances there was one of almost daily recurrence—a slight one, perhaps—but still in its effects a grievance of importance. Margaret was in the habit of using many home-spun words and strong provincialisms, and sometimes there blended in her conversation a tone that Mrs. Sinclair assured her was very unbecoming to feminine lips.

"But why is it wrong to talk of dogs and horses?" Margaret would then demand; "I like them almost better than anything. You know that I have been brought up amongst them and cannot help it."

"There is nothing absolutely *wrong* in what you say, my dear girl, but so much stable-talk is not pretty in a young lady," her preceptress assured her gravely. Margaret thought this fastidious and was chagrined, she even regretted the day when she had put herself into training to be made like other women; but, by degrees, as her reading supplied her with new themes of interest and reflection, the obnoxious subjects were

less and less frequently intruded on Mrs. Sinclair's tingling ears. Then, again, there was much of Jacky's homely teaching to undo; superstitions and prejudices, that flourished rank as weeds in Margaret's mind, were a sore trouble to eradicate, and some of them would not yield an inch to all the powers of argument or persuasion that could be brought to bear upon them. Mrs. Sinclair found that she had, indeed, undertaken a bewildering task in this neglected, high-tempered young creature, but she consoled herself with the reflection that notwithstanding her wildness, her peculiarities, and her ignorance, Margaret was both a talented and lovable girl, who would not bring discredit on her labours in the end, and perhaps her interest and attachment grew in proportion to the difficulties she encountered.

As Tibbie Ryder, after the sharp fright she had received, judged it expedient to keep her own counsel on her ill-gained knowledge, neither Sylvan Holt's domestic trials nor Margaret's heiress-ship transpired through her, and Mirkdale remained in ignorance of all that had recently happened at the Grange: but when Bell Rowley heard who had come to live at Mill Cottage and for what purpose, she made herself exceedingly merry at Margaret's expense, and gave it out amongst her gossips that "That strange Sylvan Holt's daughter had got a governess at last, and that she was going to be veneered and polished, preparatory to her introduction into society as heiress of Wildwood." The witty remark came round to Mrs. Joan Clervaux, and subsequently to Margaret herself, who winced at the contempt it implied, and thought, with a hard cruel throbbing at her heart, how much deeper might be the scorn when all should be known, and people came to regard her, not as "Sylvan Holt's daughter," but as the daughter of the guilty mother who had betrayed them both.

CHAPTER XXV.

A RUDE SHOCK.

It was only a few days after this, on the occasion of one of her tonic visits to Oakfield, that Margaret Holt first saw Colonel

Fielding's mother—that Geraldine Favell whose youthful grace and elegance had become familiar to her through Mrs. Joan Clervaux's frequent praises. According to her usual practice she walked through the shrubbery to the glass-door, and tapping on the pane she was immediately bid to come in. She was not aware of the presence of any second person in the drawing-room until after she had kissed Mrs. Joan, and told her Mrs. Sinclair had sent her down to be "set right," when her old friend turned her round to where an elderly lady was reclining in a low chair by the further window, saying—

"This is my very dear little Gipsy, Margaret Holt; you must make each other's acquaintance, Geraldine."

Margaret blushed crimson as she laid her hand in that which Mrs. Fielding extended towards her:—

"I have heard my son Rupert speak of you in a way that makes me know you already," said the stranger, looking with a very earnest but kindly gaze into her face; she held the young girl's fingers for some moments, and relinquished them with a gentle pressure. The impression Margaret had received from Mrs. Joan Clervaux of her early companion was fully borne out by her present appearance. She was a delicate looking woman, and wore an anxious expression, but she was still beautiful; she would indeed be beautiful at every age, her countenance was so sweetly benign and pure in feature, while her complexion was scarcely less brilliant than it had been in her first youth.

Margaret had interrupted the two in the midst of recalling a long list of the men and women of their acquaintance who had been young with them; and they now resumed it. Who had married this one and who that: who had had a severe disappointment and had never rallied from it; who had made a great success in life and who as notorious a failure; whose family had been a crown of honour, and whose a burden of misery and disgrace; who was dead, who had mysteriously disappeared, and who were running on steadily, still in the old grooves where they ran so long ago. It sounded a rather tedious ditty to Margaret, to whom every name, incident, and allusion, was unfamiliar; but when they reverted to the theme of Mrs. Fielding's family, which had already been discussed, but which could never be worn bald of interest, she listened with close attention and even with eagerness—an eagerness which almost betrayed itself in her variable colour and parted rosy lips.

"I shall grieve to lose Amy," said Mrs. Fielding, regretfully; "the dear child has always been so companionable with me; and though we may trust this marriage is for her happiness, we who give her up find it hard to reconcile ourselves to the long separation. Ten years is a weary while to look forward to, though it seems but a short time when it is past."

"Katherine will replace her to you, and there is Cecy besides," suggested Mrs. Joan; "your description of Cecy wins my heart."

"Cecy is a darling treasure to her mother!" said Mrs. Fielding, with enthusiasm; "she is our youngest—Rupert loves her best. But Katherine is quite the dame; I cannot draw her picture for you—at least not satisfactorily. The Laird's pet is Katie."

"You would have been glad to keep the Colonel at home now, Geraldine?"

"Oh yes! Since we have lost his dear brothers it has been all our wish that he should leave the service, but he still says, No. He was always attached to his profession, and we are well aware that a braver and better soldier than Rupert Fielding never drew sword. They are anticipating a crisis in our Indian affairs, and he will not miss the struggle, if it should come to one."

"My nephew, young Martin Carew, went out with his regiment only two months ago. He longs for active service too."

"I sympathize with the ardent young men, but oh, Joan! they forget our anxieties at home! Have you any one out in India for whom you care?" This question was addressed to Margaret, who replied—

"Only Martin Carew."

Mrs. Fielding's eyes lingered with an intent, scrutinizing expression on Margaret's countenance for several moments after she had spoken, and at last she said musingly:

"I cannot tell what it is in this child's face that reminds me so forcibly of Madeline Digby, Joan, who wanted to marry her handsome cousin Sydney Brooke—you must remember her?" Mrs. Joan replied, with an appearance of restraint, that she had never met the lady referred to.

"But you must have heard her spoken of," persisted Mrs. Fielding: "she was a gloriously beautiful woman, though notoriously unprincipled and extravagant. Sydney Brooke and she were made for each other, but her parents would not let them marry."

Mrs. Joan Clervaux's memory seemed to fail her here alto-

gether : she shook her head and endeavoured to speak of something else, but the other lady was so strongly seized by the idea that she still sought to revive her old friend's dormant recollection.

"You may never have seen her, for she was not introduced until long after either of us, but she was the town's talk both during her first season and the season after her marriage—for she made an extremely rich marriage after giving up her cousin. Of course, she was wretched—Ah ! I see you recall the circumstances now : well, can you give me any authentic information as to what became of her finally !"

Mrs. Joan could not charge her memory with all the details, she said ; it was generally understood at the period that she and her husband had separated : and again she tried to divert the subject.

"It was a mysterious, hushed-up affair altogether," Mrs. Fielding remarked ; "there was a whisper afloat for some time that they led a wretched life together, and the next news was that she had fled the country, and joined her cousin abroad. He was never seen again, and some people went so far as to say that her husband pursued and killed him ; not in a duel, but that he actually *murdered* him, and was imprisoned several years for the crime. He has never come back to England, I believe, and if he has, he keeps himself buried in seclusion. I know they had a child, but whether it was a son or a——"

Mrs. Fielding was suddenly arrested in her speech by meeting Margaret's eye fixed upon her with a wild agonised interest and curiosity : it flashed instantaneously across her mind that she had been speaking thus incautiously of the poor child's mother.

"Oh ! Joan ! what have I said ?" exclaimed she, deeply shocked at her inadvertence, as Margaret rose and left the room.

"You meant no harm, Geraldine, but random words often wound cruelly : spare me a few moments, I must go to her ;" and Mrs. Joan went out hastily to seek her favourite and comfort her. Margaret had rushed up-stairs to her old friend's room, and flung herself down beside the bed with her face buried upon it. Her violent emotions never dissolved in tears, but she appeared scarcely less overwhelmed than she had done that day when the shock came upon her. Mrs. Joan called her gently by her name, but she did not answer ; she touched her ;

and, for the first time since they had known each other, her caress was repulsed. She entreated her to speak; explained, softened, reasoned: all to no purpose; Margaret seemed as insensible as a stone. Then she grew alarmed, and tried to draw away one of the hands that hid her face, but the girl struck at her violently, exclaiming—

“Leave me to myself! do leave me, or I shall go mad!” Mrs. Joan obeyed and left her, but she listened anxiously to all her movements, and towards dusk hearing her stealing down the stairs to escape, she came out and walked with her up Beckford Lane. Margaret did not now reject her company, and when they had proceeded a little way she said penitently—

“Mrs. Joan, I beg your pardon for my violence this afternoon: I was almost beside myself. You see people *do* know and *do* remember that miserable story—they even recognise me as her daughter. I must do as Jacky says—‘brazen it out.’”

“That is an ugly term, Gipsy, but I know what you mean, and I agree that it is the best way to bear your position. The sin is not yours, remember, though you bear some of its heaviest penalties. Take heart, and be a good girl, and God will keep you.”

For several days after this incident Margaret was more capricious and wayward than ever; Mrs. Sinclair could do nothing at all with her unless she consented to sing and play by the hour together; “I am like Saul—possessed with an evil spirit,” said she bitterly; “perhaps music may exorcise it.” Very often she did not come to her lessons at all, but went galloping over the country with no companion but Oscar—now to Deepgyll, then to Fernbro’-foot, and again to Middlemoor—but always avoiding Oakfield, where Mrs. Fielding was still staying. Mrs. Joan Clervaux sent message after message, and note after note, without eliciting any answer, and at last she walked up to the Grange to try the effect of a personal remonstrance, but Margaret told her she was still out of tune from that last hard wrench, and must have a longer time to recover.

“Mrs. Fielding is full of a tender pity and regret for what she did; she wounded you unintentionally,” said Mrs. Joan; “will you let her tell you so herself?”

“No; I will not meet her again if I can help it,” was Margaret’s reply; “I bear no malice, but I cannot look her in the face when I remember all she knows—so very little progress do I make in my attempts to ‘brazen it out.’”

Mrs. Joan left off entreating her after that, and not until Mrs. Fielding had left Mirkdale altogether did Margaret resume her visits to Oakfield.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A VISITOR AT WILDWOOD.

It followed unavoidably that as Margaret was at Mill Cottage daily for so many hours with Mrs. Sinclair, her father should be left alone much more than formerly, but greatly as he missed her he made no complaint. Since his return from abroad a marked and very singular change had been wrought in him. He was no longer violent in temper or rough and coarse in language as he had been; he went and came about the house and farm like an automaton. This tried Jacky exceedingly. She confided to Anty that she did not like t' master's look at all; what ailed him, she should wish to know, that he never spoke above his breath? Anty agreed that the alteration was strange and ominous, and said it would do his heart good to hear t' master threatening at 'em all after his wont. Jacky resorted to extreme measures to rouse the old spirit, but failed utterly; even when she purposely upset the milk-skeel in his path, he only went a step or two out of his way to avoid the snowy rivulet, and then strode moodily forward.

When the twelfth of August was past, he was up on the moor with his dogs and his gun every day; frequently going out after breakfast and not returning until nightfall. Margaret would often appoint to meet him at a certain spot, and go from Mill Cottage to join him, carrying their dinner in a little covered basket; she would then either tramp after him with the game-bag slung over her shoulder, occasionally, even, taking a shot herself, or if he had had good sport and the heat was very sultry, they would plunge into some ferny hollow, and, while the dogs lay dreaming at their feet, they would rest and talk the daylight away, and wander home in the beautiful moorland gloaming.

It was while they were thus in retreat one burning afternoon, that they were startled by another gun fired not far away.

Sylvan Holt sprang up, and looked keenly and angrily around.

"It is on Sir Thomas Rowley's ground—the sound came from beyond that belt of firs," said Margaret.

"Sir Thomas never shoots: it must be either his game-keeper or some friend then," replied her father still watching.

"Mrs. Joan Clervaux told me yesterday that he had let his moor and the Holm Cottage for the season," Margaret explained.

"Let it to some one who is not conversant with our geography: he has leaped the fence and is coming this way!" and Sylvan Holt hailed the stranger in the intention of warning him that he was trespassing beyond the limits of his property.

"Don't, dear father, it is Colonel Fielding," whispered Margaret, hurriedly catching his arm, but the gentleman had heard the call, and was advancing straight towards them.

"Who is Colonel Fielding?" asked her father.

"I told you about his kindness to me at Deepgyll that day poor Crosspatch was killed," Margaret hastily explained.

Sylvan Holt dropped his angry *brusquerie* immediately, and as Colonel Fielding drew near he met him and put his apology aside. Margaret would have been glad to bury herself out of sight amongst the tall plummy ferns if it had been practicable, but she was constrained to stand erect and acknowledge Colonel Fielding's courteous and eager greeting, while a blush gradually rose and spread and burned upon her face at the recollection of the scene at Oakfield during his mother's recent visit there. He did not seem to observe her confusion, but talked aside to her father for a considerable time, giving her leisure to recover herself; when he again turned to her she was very pale, and her manner was shyly and proudly constrained.

"Your Mirkdale is in its glory now," he said to her; "I am familiar with this deep purple glow on the moors, but those corn lands stretching in waves of gold and umber, and the woods brightening into their autumnal beauty give the landscape a peculiar richness of effect; especially when, as now, there is the blaze of a harvest sun over all."

Margaret acquiesced, but she would not respond—*could* not, rather; she was tongue-tied by her own fast-rising, importunate sensations of trouble and shame; it seemed as if the remembrance of her mother's sin was to pervade and poison every

pleasure! but for that how glad, how more than glad, she would have been to meet Colonel Fielding again. He, however, appeared quite unobservant of her restraint, and remarking to Sylvan Holt that it was his first day out that season, he lifted his cap, whistled to his dogs and left them.

Three days subsequent to this rencontre on the moor, as Margaret was sitting by the open window of the summer parlour, buried in the perusal of a new book which had come down in the last London parcel, she was startled by hearing Colonel Fielding's voice close by in conversation with her father. She instantly dashed down her book, and ran to tell Jacky that there was some one coming home with her master.

"Sylvan Holt's bringing company to supper do you mean, bairn?" cried the servant indignantly; "a bonnie upset! What 'll we come to, next, I wonder? 'T' skies 'll fall surely."

"It will be Colonel Fielding's dinner-time," suggested Margaret humbly.

"*Colonel Fielding!*" echoed Jacky in a very different tone from her first; "why then he sal ha' a dinner fit for a prince."

Margaret's countenance brightened, and her heart was eased of a considerable burden, for the servant was quite capable of turning *stunt* on the spot and refusing to do a hand's turn from that moment.

"What will you give us, you dear old Jacky?" said she.

"Eh, 'I'm dear auld Jacky again, am I?" was the shrewd reply, "*dear auld Jacky*, on'y hear till 't! Well, my bonnie, I tell you what I ha' gotten ready for t' master's supper—there's a grand grouse pie i' t' oven at this minute, an' there's apricot tart, an' custards, an' cream i' t' larder—will that fit him, think ye? An' there's eggs i' plenty—sal I toss up a omelet?"

Margaret said that would do beautifully, only call it dinner instead of supper, and send in some strong coffee afterwards.

"Let me alane, an' I'll do all right," responded Jacky cheerfully, "didn't I serve t' auld Langlands? an' where was *their* moral or match for fine doings while they had t' means. I'll get up some wine fra' t' cellar, an' be you easy for t' rest."

Margaret might have been easy from the beginning, for Jacky's providings were always abundant and excellent of their kind; she, however, still lingered in the kitchen and asked, could *she* do anything.

"Yes," replied Jacky with emphasis, "you can go an' sleek that hair that t' wind's been making free wi', an' you can put

on that Indy frock I ironed this forenoon; it's lying on your bed now. Lady Frances Langland an' her that was Philip's wife always dressed themselves out afore dining. Now, bairn, go, will ye?"

Margaret, thus admonished, went to her room and did Jacky's bidding, all the while asking herself why her colour went and came and her heart beat so painfully fast. She was dressed when the servant came creeping to the door and whispered—

"Let me see, Margaret, if you're looking your bonniest? Yes, you'll do—now I'm going to carry t' dinner in, an' you're to come down."

Jacky had evidently settled it in her own mind that this day was a sort of crisis, and though her excitement did keep within due bounds, it threatened momentarily to break out in some very foolish wish or prophecy; she wanted Margaret to pass downstairs before her, but the girl hung back.

"Go down," reiterated Jacky; "go down at once. Your father's i' t' parlour wi' t' Colonel. Oh, but I like t' look o' him right weel! He'minds me so o' Philip Langland. What's thee trembling for, bairn, thee shakes like a leaf! Thee's thinking o' that poor lady. Nay, Marg'ret, but he's not the man to cast it i' thy face," added the servant warmly.

"Never mind me, Jacky, I'll come presently," said her mistress, and as the faithful old creature left her, she went to the open window and let the cool evening breeze blow upon her face; "it is morbid and wrong, as Mrs. Sinclair says," thought she to herself; "but how can I overcome it! It is stronger than me! That degrading recollection surges up in my mind whenever I might be happy!"

Not many moments were left her for self-examination before Jacky called out from the stairsfoot that her father was asking for her; she descended at once, unconsciously resuming her shyly proud mien as she entered the summer parlour. Colonel Fielding had taken up the book she had been reading, and was now standing with his back to the door glancing over its pages: at her step he turned round and bowed ceremoniously, for Margaret, instead of offering her hand, merely bent her head, and moved to her seat at the table beside her father. In spite of herself, she betrayed by her flittering eyelid and changing colour an uneasiness and tremor which he could not but perceive. She was thinking within herself; "Oh, I wonder whether he knows!" and when it transpired presently afterwards,

that he had come from London and had not seen any of his family for several weeks she was inexpressibly relieved.

This was only the second time that a guest had eaten of Sylvan Holt's salt under the roof of Wildwood Grange, and his daughter was extremely puzzled to conjecture how it was that Colonel Fielding found himself there. Mr. Meddowes had business with her father, but the present visitor had been a stranger to him until a few days ago, and how he had extracted an invitation from him was marvellous.

Colonel Fielding was no great conversationalist, but he had a remarkable tact in drawing out others and setting them to themselves in their most pleasing aspect. Sylvan Holt relaxed from his ordinary taciturn surliness, and entered with some spirit into the details of wild sports in Indian jungles and African deserts, for when he was young he had seen great varieties of life, as well in its barbarous and adventurous as civilized aspects. Margaret listened intently, her eyes kindling and her cheek flushing at the dramatic narration of some peril past; ere long she had forgotten herself and her haunting shadow, and when Colonel Fielding, pointing by and by to the volume she had been studying, asked, "Are you another enthusiastic young disciple of my favourite author?" she was prompt with her reply that she had only made his acquaintance that day.

"And is he likely to become a favourite?" the Colonel asked.

"I like what I have read: he makes a picture or a scene with so few lines—and some of the epithets he coins are very picturesque and descriptive. I am not certain that I shall *love* him though."

The Colonel smiled quietly, and asked her what she meant. Margaret hesitated, and her father said he did not believe she knew herself.

"Oh, yes I do indeed," she assured them; "I love that old Sir Roger de Coverly, and I love the Vicar of Wakefield dearly—but that man" pointing to the book—"has no gentleness—he seems bitter and violent, as if he were disappointed, and a little vindictive and spiteful—but I mean to read him."

"You cannot do better," said the Colonel, "he is a fine and original writer. I had a perfect furore for him ten years ago."

Colonel Fielding appeared to have a desire to probe Marga-

ret's tastes: he asked some questions and insinuated more, to which it ought to be confessed he received chiefly negative replies. He named a popular and well-known work of the day, perhaps she had not read it, or, just as frequently, had never heard of it. He touched on the theme of music. Mrs. Sinclair, she told him, had such and such operas, or sang such and such songs, but she herself had never learnt to play. He tried her on the subject of art, and discovered that she was conversant with painters' and sculptors' names and the names of their great works, but that she had probably never seen a good picture in her life. He spoke of this as if it were a matter of regret, and Margaret answered with an arch promptness that confounded him:

"Look out there," pointing to the window: "that is a picture from the hand of the grandest of the old masters; neither Claude, nor Poussin, nor Salvator Rosa can match it—can they?"

The Colonel was compelled to allow that they could not; and if he had given utterance to the thought her reply roused in his own mind, he would have said that no Raffaello or Guido or Correggio of them all had ever immortalized on canvas a fairer maiden than her fair self. But Colonel Fielding was not given to the paying of compliments, or Margaret to the receiving of them, and the occasion was permitted to pass by unimproved.

"We call this meal, after a long day out on the moor, *supper*, Colonel Fielding," said Sylvan Holt, "but Jacky has attempted to improvise a dinner in compliment to you. Will you drink any more wine?"

The Colonel's glass had been standing empty for some time; he declined more, however, and exchanged his seat for one opposite to Margaret, who had retreated to her basket chair beside the window.

"Do you regret when the evenings begin to close in earlier, as they are already doing?" he asked her.

"Yes; I like the long light days," she replied; "this is very bleak when the woods and hills are blocked up with drifts of snows. They lie unmelted, some years, beneath the hedges until far into May." Sylvan Holt was leaving the room, and she asked where he was going.

"To smoke my cigar under the cedar—will you come out too?" The Colonel would, if Margaret preferred it, so they all

went in front of the house. It was a balmy night without much air: the sun was just set, and the red and purple glories of its departing lingered in the sky while the mysterious shadows of darkness were stealthily creeping up the valley.

"I am not surprised you love Mirkdale," said Colonel Fielding, as Margaret and he paced to and fro the grass together; "this is a picture to store up in memory for life. I know nothing finer either in England or out of it."

"Not in Italy? not in Switzerland?" asked Margaret, almost incredulously.

"Neither in Italy nor in Switzerland. There are wilder and grander scenes—scenes too of much greater extent; but in all my travels I do not remember to have witnessed anything more gloriously beautiful than Mirkdale under these clouds—Mirkdale just as we see it now." They stood still for several moments contemplating it in silence: "Cecy should see this! Cecy is my youngest sister and an enthusiast for nature like yourself: she is just about your own age, too," remarked the Colonel, and then, insensibly as it afterwards seemed to Margaret, he began to speak to her of his own people at home—of the Laird, his dear old father; of his mother—a pattern for women, he called her; of his sisters Geraldine and Amy, Katherine and Cecy; of the house at Manselands and even of the old servants in it. Margaret was very much interested in these details—very much interested indeed. From listening she fell to questioning in her turn: she wished to know if Cecy was very accomplished (Cecy had, somehow, a stronger charm for her fancy than any of the rest): if Cecy was pretty, if Cecy liked horses and dogs. The Colonel was ready to give the fullest particulars. Cecy, he had been told, was the least accomplished of his sisters, but he did not believe it himself; he was sure, however, that she was by far the loveliest, though all the women of the Fielding family were noted for their beauty. He knew that she was fond of riding, and that she had been rather wild and intractable, because never a day passed that somebody did not take occasion to tell her so; but she was only a child of seventeen, he added, and was but just done with her governess. Then Margaret must needs ask if Cecy had been very amenable to the authority of this governess, and the Colonel was inclined to think that she had earned herself the reputation of being an affectionate little rebel. In describing Cecy it was singular how many points of resemblance to Margaret he contrived to

introduce; she became conscious of it herself at length, and said, laughing—

"I am very glad there is one girl in the world not much better than myself: I must tell Mrs. Joan Clervaux."

Perhaps the Colonel had intended throughout that she should make that application of it, for he said quietly in reply—

"Notwithstanding her short-comings, Cecy was always my pet."

Margaret was then anxious to learn if Cecy had been in London, and if she had been presented. The Colonel told her, No, there was no formal "coming out" for the girls at Manselands; it was a retired place, but they had a large family circle and many friends and connections living near which made it always cheerful. His eldest sister Geraldine, Lady Stuart, had, however, threatened her with a season in town next year if she did not tame down beforehand. Margaret thought *threatened* a very odd term to use for so great a delight as that must be, and carelessly said she wished somebody would threaten her with a like penalty, to which Colonel Fielding replied rather coolly that their native shades were best for both of them—wild flowers would not bear transplanting to an artificial atmosphere.

"Margaret has a craze to see the gay side of the world," remarked Sylvan Holt, putting in his word for the first time.

"When I hear it talked about I fancy I should like to go, but——" She stopped short and a look came into her face, such as Colonel Fielding had never seen in a girl's face before: it positively startled him!—it was like the look with which she had regarded Bell Rowley on that memorable day at Deepgyll, only fraught with tenfold more passion, tenfold keener pain! It seemed so disproportioned to the present occasion that he could only put one interpretation upon it—but that interpretation was the right one—for he knew all the details of the scene at Oakfield from his mother's letters. Sylvan Holt did not, however, remark anything but her sudden pause, and he finished the incomplete sentence by saying,—

"But you think you had better remain faithful to Wildwood—and so do I."

At that moment, opportunely to fill up an awkward pause, Jacky appeared at the parlour window and proclaimed that their coffee was growing cold on the table; nobody would

have any, however, but Margaret went in-doors and left her father and his guest still smoking their cigars upon the green. Early hours were the fashion at the Grange, but as the Colonel seemed to have a lingering tendency in his visit, the servant followed her young mistress into the parlour, and as she cleared the table and lighted the lamp admonished her that it was growing late.

"If a gentleman comes to see t' master, you must not fade your bonnie cheeks wi' siting up—it's nigh on ten o'clock," said she, significantly.

"I was not intending to stay up, Jacky; give me my candle, and I shall go to bed straightway—I'm very tired," replied Margaret. Jacky thought she spoke as if she were, and would leave the kitchen work to go up stairs and help her bonnie to undress. There was a very fine moon, and presently they saw Colonel Fielding shake hands with Sylvan Holt and go off down the fields towards his temporary home. Margaret said she wondered why her father brought him home, and asked Jacky if she did not think it strange.

"Strange enough! you might ha' felled me wi' a feather when I heard o' master bringing him to supper," was the reply; "but I hope it's a sign that he's getting out of all his queer unsociable ways. You'll be fain he should, bairn, won't you?"

"I don't feel to care so much about it as I did, Jacky; I don't think I care much about anything just now."

"Oh, but you will! you'll come right enow; you're young, an' there's plenty o' spring i' you. I won't ha' you turn to fretting again, so into bed wi' you, an' let me tuck you up comfortable!" So Jacky tucked her up comfortable, gave her a hearty kiss and a parting blessing on her cheek, and left her to her slumbers, while she herself went away to indulge in her own private speculations on the event of the evening.

"I think I see where we're coming to," said she sagaciously to herself; "it's the real ould fashion—gude fashion too. T' Colonel fancies t' bairn, an' he has asked her father may he woo an' try to win her, an' Sylvan Holt, who knows a true gentleman as well as any man, has gi'en his consent."

Jacky's shrewdness sometimes tempted her to think she saw more than there was to see, but on this occasion she saw exactly right—the case was just as she stated it to herself.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COLONEL FIELDING.

COLONEL FIELDING was a man of sudden resolves and strong feelings, tempered by a moderate prudence which was not his by grace of nature, but only by the habit of his last ten years' experience in his world. It was not often he acted rashly, and he did not act rashly in seeking a wife. He was now thirty-two years old, and it is not to be supposed that he had attained to that age of dis-illusions without going through some passage or passages of heart-pleasure and heart-pain. It is not the object of this history to represent him under the false guise of a suitor to whom love is a new name. Margaret's soul was fresh and passion-pure, indeed, but his had gone through one fiery trial that had left scars which no after-time could ever efface. At their first interview his imagination had been captivated by some resemblance, either real or fancied, that she bore to his lost love, and during that long day of misfortunes at Deepgyll she had won him wholly. When obliged to leave Mirkdale in the spring to fulfil his engagements elsewhere, he went away in the full intention of returning as promptly as circumstances would permit, and as a feasible excuse, he agreed to rent of Sir Thomas Rowley that portion of his moor adjoining Wildwood. During his absence he had made himself thoroughly acquainted with the whole dark story of Sylvan Holt's antecedents. Undeniably it was a shock to him to learn that Margaret's mother had been the guilty creature she was, but after a brief battle with himself, he set the circumstance aside as one that ought not to affect her child. He learnt, also, that she would ultimately inherit large landed estates, but his own ample means and established position raised him above the suspicion of fortune hunting. He desired to marry, to make life yield him his due of quiet happiness, and since the hot days of his youth, when Frances Stanley was his divinity, his entire and darling hope, he had seen no woman whom he could wish to possess as his wife except Margaret Holt. Her great beauty and her girlish modesty charmed him back to his golden days; her ignorance did not offend his taste, because of her native

talent and refinement; she would look up to him, he thought; she would love him, too, with all the tender warmth of a virgin heart; and he—yes, he—would make her very happy! She never could be *Frances* to him, but she could be *Margaret*—an innocent, simple-minded, adoring wife!

Aware of Sylvan Holt's violent and unsocial character, and too honourable to employ any underhand means of winning his daughter—aware also of the impossibility of getting an introduction to the Grange on any other terms, Colonel Fielding met him as man to man; told him explicitly what were his present status and future prospects; said how Margaret had attracted him; and boldly requested leave to woo her for his wife. This interview took place on the moor. Sylvan Holt was, at first, so completely staggered by the demand that he received it in utter silence. To give up his daughter was an act of self-denial such as he had never contemplated, and he was disposed to look with a half suspicious, half ferocious eye on the individual who proposed, almost as if it were his right, to transfer her affections to himself. But the Colonel was a person of imposing presence; he had a persuasive and beguiling yet truthful tongue, and was every inch a gentleman; and Sylvan Holt was constrained to acknowledge it. It was no easy task to deny a request so frankly made; and as Colonel Fielding had dealt openly with him, he was open in his turn. He said there were certain family secrets—the Colonel gravely replied that he knew them: then he confessed that Margaret had been differently brought up from other women, and that she was wilful and capricious; the suitor said he liked her the better for it. Finally, Sylvan Holt demanded four and twenty hours for consideration, and promised his answer at the same time and place on the following day. The interval he employed in testing himself and Margaret. He began by speaking to her of the meeting on the moor with Colonel Fielding when she was with him, and then drew her on to talk of all that had happened at Deepgyll: He contrived to elicit from her unconscious and artless admissions, that she remembered his kindness there with a warm gratitude; and though he did not detect as much as Jacky had done, it was clear to him that she was disposed to regard Colonel Fielding favourably. A sentiment was born in her heart which, accordingly as it was now treated, might either die untimely or grow into the happiness of a whole life-time. He therefore argued against his own selfish desire to

keep her to himself; that some day he *must* leave her—leave her, if unmarried, exposed to vast dangers and temptations; so beautiful, so wealthy, and withal so ignorant of the wicked and wily ways of the world that she might easily fall a prey to some thriftless libertine who would make her life a misery to herself and a reproach to him. On the other hand, here was a gentleman—not a mere hot-headed boy to rave one day and cloy the next—but a man of grave experience who knew the world and was known of it honourably, and who came to him frankly and said, “I love your daughter—if I can win her heart will you give her to me to be my wife?”—not the everyday mode of courtship, perhaps, but still a mode that has its advantages, and one which the present circumstances excused and even justified. In his anxious dilemma Sylvan Holt bethought him to go and take counsel with Margaret’s faithful old friend, Mrs. Joan Clervaux. He stated the case plainly, and asked her best advice as one who knew the girl’s mind.

Mrs. Joan breathed a sigh for her beloved nephew’s lost cause, and then spoke a kind word for Geraldine Favell’s son.

“I think he would make her happy; I am sure he would be good to her,” said she, but there seemed a doubt lurking somewhere in the background. In fact, Mrs. Joan knew the old story of Frances Stanley, and judging by her own constant heart was disposed to look coldly on second loves.

Sylvan Holt suggested; “If I do not give him leave, perhaps he will take it,” and Mrs. Joan considered that there was nothing more likely; “and if Margaret should deceive me?” said he.

“Better not put temptation in the way. Let him try his fortune with her: as I told you before, he will be good to her because he is so thoroughly good himself,” was the old lady’s ultimatum. But as Sylvan Holt was leaving her, she recollected what had been said by Mrs. Fielding about her son’s projected return to India, and immediately mentioned it.

“Margaret shall never go out to India with him,” said her father resolutely; “No! I cannot afford to give her up quite so much as that implies. If he wish to marry her he must stay at home. I shall make that stipulation the condition of my consent.”

And such was the answer Colonel Fielding received to his petition, when he and Sylvan Holt met on the moor the next day. How he received and accepted the condition may be inferred from the circumstance of his visit to the Grange the

same evening—a visit that was to be followed up by many more of the same unceremonious character; indeed, Jacky, without any bidding, began presently to arrange for *three* at the evening meal as naturally as she had once done for *two*; and Oscar, who was an excellent though suspicious judge of character, received the Colonel into his warmest confidence, always met him at the door and led him, so to speak, to his mistress's feet, and there left him to prosecute his hopeful suit, while he himself continued his interrupted siesta on the rug.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARGARET'S LOVE.

WHEN Colonel Fielding, in mentally arranging their respective positions, proposed to himself that Margaret Holt should “look up to him,” it was neither so very vain nor so very extravagant an expectation as, perhaps, at the first blush it may appear. He had an immense advantage over her by his age, his long study of the feminine idiosyncrasy, and his general worldly wisdom, and she did look up to him by-and-by with an enthusiastic faith. If these had been his only endowments, however, it is scarcely probable that her imagination and her heart would have been so strongly drawn towards him as they were: but he had besides those fruits of time whose power and influence he was by no means inclined to undervalue, the lofty principles of honour of a true Christian gentleman, grafted on the graceful courtesy, the bravery, and the stalwart beauty of a knight of old romance. His manner towards Margaret was full of a quiet deference—delicate flattery to which women are peculiarly susceptible: he never tried to put a curb on her wilfulness, yet soon he had a command over her very thoughts; whatever she did, or said, or fancied, was coloured unconsciously by her respect for him. The object of his frequent visits was not communicated to her, and by dint of seeing him almost daily their acquaintance ripened fast to intimacy: she lost her feeling of restraint, and dared to be again her own wildly graceful and bewitching self: she went and came in her

frank simplicity, gradually learning—and betraying that she had learnt—to feel a pleasure in Colonel Fielding's visits beyond any other pleasure, and to be as disappointed as she could be when he failed to come. And thus, inch by inch and step by step, he won his way into her maiden heart, and for once in this April world of shine and shower there was a course of true love begun that promised to run smooth.

Colonel Fielding did not lose his head as a younger man might have done—and small blame to him, as Jacky remarked: he was always master both of himself and her. There is rarely or ever perfect equality between two lovers: "*il y a toujours l'un qui donne et l'autre qui tend le jeu.*" Still it must not be supposed that he regarded Margaret with any measure of coldness or calculation; he was incapable of it. He loved her, indeed, very fondly and very tenderly, and if she had known how to use expertly the wiles and coquetries of her sex she might, perhaps, have converted his relying affection into a passionate torture and have made him her devoted slave—at the risk of finally losing him altogether when he came to his right mind again. But Margaret was devoid of art: and besides, she considered him so great and good that it would have seemed a profanity to try to make him bow to any freak of hers. It was long before she gave the right name to his attachment to her: she felt intuitively that he liked her, and she liked to have his approval, but she never put herself through any course of mental inquisition to discover whither it all tended. She *felt*, indeed, but she had no morbid turn for analyzing feeling; she just went blithely on her way, sensible of a brighter atmosphere in her home and more joy and thought in her life than there had been, but never conjuring Fate to turn prophetess and reveal how long they would last or where they would end.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HALCYON DAYS.

MRS. SINCLAIR had cause to bless the day when Colonel Fielding came into Mirkdale; Margaret became all at once, so good,

so tractable, and so diligent. "Do let me get on," she would say; "Oh! tell me, am I so very shockingly ignorant?" To which pitiful plea the preceptress could now give flattering and cheering yet perfectly conscientious replies, such as: "You are improving beautifully, my love: I shall be quite proud of you by-and-by!" for which kind assurance Margaret would always reward her with a dozen kisses.

But Mrs. Joan Clervaux had her complaint to make: "Gipsy never comes to drink tea with an old friend now," said she, with an air of reproach, on meeting her one afternoon at Mill Cottage. Margaret was smitten with sudden penitence, and promised to go on the morrow. Accordingly, soon after dinner the next day, she found her way to Oakfield, and as Mrs. Joan was busy writing a letter to Martin Carew, Margaret begged a sheet of paper and would write also.

For a little while her pen flew rapidly along the lines; she drew a graphic picture of the dear home scenes, in-doors and out, which she knew Martin would love to read in that far away tropical land whither it was to follow him. But that accomplished, her fluency failed. It was not so easy a task to speak of herself and her present daily doings as she had imagined; she recorded a few simple facts in curt dry fashion, and then ceased, saying rather shyly to Mrs. Joan, who looked surprised at her giving up so soon; "I will finish it another time—I feel so stupid just now." Yet there was no sign of stupidity in her bright eyes and dimpling cheeks.

"Let me look at it; I daresay Martin will like it better than nothing," interposed the old lady; and taking the sheet from Margaret's hand, as she would have hidden it in the blotting-book, she read it over. The early part was the girl's very self—picturesque in phrase, easy in tone, fresh and pleasant-sounding as a runlet of spring water—but the latter was constrained and stiff. "It is a poor little epistle," was the criticism that it received; "but put your name to it, Gipsy, and it shall go." Margaret did Mrs. Joan's bidding, and then strayed into the green-house to inspect the plants, while her old friend made an end of her labour of love.

By a rather remarkable coincidence that same day Colonel Fielding discovered that it was a long time since he had paid his mother's ancient friend a visit, and he consequently made his appearance down at Oakfield about an hour after Margaret; so that Mrs. Joan Clervaux had two friends to drink tea with her

instead of one, for though she did not formally invite the Colonel he was so kind as to stay. It was rather a satisfaction to the old lady to see them together, Margaret looked so unconsciously happy. She had never noticed before how truly exquisite was her favourite's maiden blush, but she had many opportunities of studying it that afternoon. On her cheek it was a warm glow which melted imperceptibly into the creamy whiteness of her chin and throat, tinted the tip of her ear with a vivid carmine, and lost itself amongst the sunny dimples about her mouth. Mrs. Joan thought that Colonel Fielding was trying to match its colour once, for she saw him gather a cluster of half-blown monthly roses, and whispering something that was quite a secret between themselves, lay them gently against her cheek; but while he held them there the blush deepened till the flowers were quite put to shame at their paler beauty; it was a long long while since the old lady's heart had palpitated at a lover's whisper, but her memory kept one or two sacred recollections which made her think the Colonel but a cold wooer; he did not seem to exult in that tell-tale blush as he might once have done; she even doubted whether his pulse went one throb the quicker, because he saw he had the power to make it come and go whenever he would. "Ah!" said she to herself with excusable regret, "Martin and Gipsy would have been much more equally yoked than these two—but Gipsy thinks far otherwise. Oh! if she could but have seen and been satisfied with that honest first love!"

When the time came for Margaret to return home, Colonel Fielding offered his escort, but Mrs. Joan insisted on sending her maid Jaques also, as being altogether more consonant with the Mirkdale canons of propriety. The solitary Jaques walked in the rear while Margaret, the Colonel, and Oscar, went a few paces in advance, not hurrying themselves by any means.

It was now midway in September—the golden month in Mirkdale; the wheat harvest was in progress, and the orchards were beautiful with their stores of ripe fruit. Only here and there was there yet a changed leaf; the limes were yellowing in Bransby Park, and the maples also in the hedgerows that skirted the lanes, but the elms, oaks, and beeches still kept their full summer suits of green. Immediately about the Grange there were so many cedars, yews, and firs which do not shed their foliage, that the coming on of winter was less perceptible there than lower down in the valley; but certain mountain ash

trees that grew by the wood side had begun to hang their clusters of scarlet berries amongst the darker boughs as signs of the declining year. Margaret observed them for the first time that season as she was going home with Colonel Fielding after their visit to Oakfield. There was a glorious moonlight; all the fells lay distinct in its white radiance, as if a mist, faint and almost impalpable, closely enfolded their flanks. Issuing from the glade at Wildfoot the scene was extremely beautiful. Colonel Fielding—ardent lover or not—would fain have lingered by the stile with his companion to enjoy it, but close behind was the tall, mournful, timid Jaques, and Margaret thought they must not keep her out in the cold, especially as she had to go back to Oakfield alone: she also suggested that the view from the Grange porch was equally fine and much more expansive; yet, though Colonel Fielding yielded his own wish to her modest representation, he did not feel that it would be quite the same to him, particularly when they encountered the Master of Wildwood at the last gate and Jaques was dismissed with a gratuity.

“You have *both* of you been down to Oakfield, then?” said Sylvan Holt, interrogatively. “I understood that you were going out snipe-shooting on Bilberry moss this afternoon, Colonel, and I went over there to join the sport.”

The Colonel was extremely sorry—he had quite forgotten the arrangement, he said, but he would go to Bilberry moss and shoot snipes another day. Sylvan Holt glanced at his daughter's innocent face, smiled in his grim fashion, and then turned and preceded them up the hill. Just above the gate where they had paused, hung a stately mountain-ash clustered over with berries that gleamed like gems in the dewy moonshine.

“Oh, it seems but the other day that those berries were a dull green!” exclaimed Margaret, regretfully; “winter will be upon us ere we are aware. I wish it would be summer or autumn always.”

“I should like to make it summer for you the whole year round; but perhaps you would tire of it,” said the Colonel.

“No, I should not. In winter we are prisoners sometimes for a week or a fortnight together; the road is quite impassable often; I cannot even go to church—then you may think whether it is dull or not. The pleasantest time of all with us is while the heather is in bloom—I am always sorry when it begins to fade; and I don't like to see the ash-berries turn red either. Do you mind it?”

The Colonel stopped to break off a bunch of the pretty poison fruit depending from a low branch overhead.

"I have not spent an autumn in the country since I was a lad—not an autumn in England for a dozen years at least," replied he.

"Then how have you borne to stay so long in Mirkdale? It must have been very lonely for you, has it not?"

"Every place but Mirkdale would seem lonely to me now; I have had a pleasant study since I came which I shall be loath to leave, but perhaps, I may not need to leave it; I trust not," he added in a lower and more meaning tone.

Margaret heard his words, but she did not see any peculiar drift in them, and replied gently—

"I told Mr. Meddowes that he would have liked it had he stayed longer, but while he was here we had only thunderstorms and heavy rains."

Sylvan Holt reached the house some minutes before his daughter and Colonel Fielding, but he waited in the porch until they came up, and then asked the Colonel if he was coming in; he was standing full in the doorway at the time, and did not seem very anxious that the invitation should be accepted. Colonel Fielding understood him, and declined by reason of the lateness of the hour, made his adieux and departed; Margaret was then turning to go in-doors when her father bade her stay out with him for a little while.

"My daughter scarcely seems my daughter now when there are so many to share her," said he drawing her fondly to his side.

"Oh! dear father, I have not seemed to neglect you, have I?" exclaimed she, with keen self-reproach.

"I have been alone all day since breakfast, Maggie," was the reply. Then seeing she was wounded, he tried to comfort her by assuring her that he knew it was not her fault, she must be busy with her lessons.

"It was not the lessons," Margaret said, "but that the evenings were so often taken up by Colonel Fielding's visits. But you like him to come, don't you, father? he is a little company for you," she added, rather wistfully.

"I could be quite content without him, Maggie: I think we did very well alone together—you and I—before he appeared in Mirkdale."

"He will go away soon—when the shooting is over," Margaret replied, and her father thought a low sigh followed.

"Has he told you that he is going away soon?" he asked.

"No, he has not said anything about it; but why should he stay? Some one, Mrs. Joan, I think, named his going out to India by-and-by."

"Did she? He had that intention, perhaps, but I believe he has recently changed his mind. The last mail brought intelligence that the outbreak apprehended there had passed over without anything serious."

"Oh, I am glad for Martin Carew's sake, and how rejoiced Mrs. Joan must be! I am surprised she did not name it when I was with her to-day."

"Perhaps she did mention it some time since, and you have forgotten—it is old news now."

Margaret thought it was impossible that she could have forgotten if she had ever heard it, because she was so interested to know all that was going on in India on Martin Carew's account. She knew he wanted to see some active service, and now he would be disappointed.

"Not disappointed for very long it may be: the country is still in an unsettled state," her father told her.

"And when anything does happen, of course, Colonel Fielding will be in haste to be gone."

Sylvan Holt said that might depend on circumstances—he had thought of leaving the service altogether.

"Oh! but why should he?" Margaret exclaimed, with a deprecating and surprised air. "When he is so enthusiastically attached to his profession why should he abandon it? Do you know, father, if he belonged to us I would rather see him a soldier than anything—if he were my brother, I mean. He was made for a great captain, was he not?"

"He is a fine brave man, no doubt of it, Maggie, and he fits his place well; but he is the only son his father has left now, and it would be sad to lose him too; consider that. How should I feel if you were going away from me to India?"

Margaret laughed and asked what likelihood there was of *that*? Did he anticipate her turning *cantinière* to follow a regiment?

"We never know what may happen, child, but it will be a sorrowful day to me when I lose you," Sylvan Holt replied, tenderly, folding one of her chilled little hands in his.

She looked up in his face with a comical displeasure, and said he was a foolish old father to talk such nonsense about

losing her. "You know that I am going to bide at Wildwood all the days of my life," she added, more gravely. "I began to fancy once that I should like to get away from it and see the world, but I don't care about that any more now."

"Make no hasty resolves, Maggie; I shall never stand in the way of any change that is for your happiness."

"I am sure you would not, dear father; but I don't want any change: I should like this time to stay always."

"With Colonel Fielding coming and going every day, Maggie?" Sylvan Holt suggested.

Margaret hesitated for a moment or two, and then said frankly—

"I think it is almost happier—more cheerful, you know, father. It is something to look forward to at the day's end, is it not?"

This admission gave deep though unintentional pain to Sylvan Holt. He remembered the time when his return was enough to look forward to at the day's end for all pleasure, and he was reluctantly obliged to accept the certainty that henceforward he could hold only the second place in his dear daughter's heart. For an instant he seemed angry with himself for having consented to Colonel Fielding's suit, but smothering the unworthy feeling he said—

"It is pleasant, and I wish he may stay after the shooting is over. I could spare him very readily for myself, but I think Maggie likes to see him now and then."

"Yes, father, Maggie does—and he likes to see her too: he told her so; and I believe he does *really*," replied the girl nestling to her father's side.

"*Really*, Maggie?" echoed he, and then, observing that there was a heavy dew falling, he said they must go in-doors or Jacky would lecture them.

CHAPTER XXX.

MIRKDALE GOSSIP.

THE fact of Colonel Fielding's frequent visits to Wildwood transpired very quickly, and caused first much whispered comment and then louder animadversion. The Holts had never

been received in society; there was a mystery about them; they were people whom nobody knew—what could the popular and accomplished Colonel Fielding find to attract him there? the neighbourhood began to ask—for, like other small country neighbourhoods, that of Mirkdale had no talent for minding its own business. Miss Bell Rowley even went further, and assailed Mrs. Joan Clervaux to furnish explanation of the Colonel's mysterious conduct, but the old lady took the lofty ground of none being required: "Colonel Fielding chose his own company, and chose with fine taste, as it appeared to her," she said; "and if Sylvan Holt's daughter were his attraction at the Grange, was that anyway remarkable, considering her beauty and engaging disposition?" "But was it likely that Colonel Fielding would marry her? and if he did not—" Bell suggested, with insolent significance. Mrs. Joan replied wrathfully that no man breathing would dare to trifle with Margaret Holt, and that she was a wife for an emperor.

Bell Rowley carried the matter far and wide, and much speculation and wonderment was the result, but none of it came to the ears of those most concerned in it, nor is it probable that they would have paid much heed to it if it had. At length, however, amongst other places, a rumour flew northward to Manselands, and thence expedited a letter from Mrs. Fielding to her son, entreating him, if it were not too late, to draw back from his contemplated alliance. She touched on Margaret's "worse than motherless" condition, using the very words that the girl herself had bitterly prophesied would be used in speaking of her; bade him remember their own spotless lineage, his military rank and high standing in the world, and spare them the contumely that might result from such a marriage. She added that Margaret's heiress-ship was another source of disquiet to her, lest evil tongues should insinuate that Rupert Fielding had forgotten his high standard of honour in a dazzle of fortune.

Colonel Fielding revered his mother, but this was a point on which he would brook no interference even from her, and he replied to her letter briefly and emphatically; "My honour is irretrievably pledged; and even were it not, I love Margaret Holt more dearly than I ever thought to love any woman again. I believe she will soon be my wife; and I hope you will receive her as a daughter, and use her all the more tenderly for that deprivation which was not her fault but her very

great misfortune. As for her wealth, I have not and I shall not make it any consideration; and I think my mother must know her son too well to suppose that he will take counsel at evil tongues." To this Mrs. Fielding wrote: "We all regret that you have chosen so *unwisely*, as we must still feel, dear Rupert; but since you have chosen, be assured that we will receive *your wife* when you bring her to us with open arms and open hearts."

Disinterested people, who knew Sylvan Holt only as an eccentric gentleman who farmed a small estate of his own, apparently for his living, and his daughter as a very beautiful girl, said that Colonel Fielding's infatuation was very pardonable, for Margaret Holt was a fair enough excuse for any folly: had they been aware that she was heiress to Abbeymeads and Rushfall, their remarks would probably have taken a very different and much more respectful tone. But Mrs. Joan Clervaux began to feel anxious for her young friend's dignity, she did not like the rumours and cavillings that flew about Mirkdale society, and secretly wished that Colonel Fielding would bring the halcyon days of wooing to a climax, that she might have absolute leave and license to stop the mouths of all gossipers by announcing a formal engagement.

But though Colonel Fielding would gladly have had the affair settled, he did not manifest any over-eagerness; he wanted to make surety double sure before casting his fortune on Margaret's yea or nay; and besides that Sylvan Holt nervously protested against any hurried measures: "Let us be certain," he would say to the Colonel, "let us be quite certain that there is love enough between you to last you your lives. I will not give Margaret up without more assurance of that than I at present see." In fact, he desired to put off the evil day of their separation as long as possible; he argued that his daughter was still so young she could not know her own mind or judge as to what would prove the best for her ultimate happiness, and even suggested the wisdom of waiting a few years; but to such delay and uncertainty Colonel Fielding utterly refused to submit. He considered that Margaret had too much womanly pride to betray any feeling for him until he had declared his own sentiments, but still, in deference to her father's restless and anxious affection, he waited the auspicious moment when his good genius should bid him speak.

An incident now to be related precipitated the event.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN ADVENTURE AT WILDWOOD.

THE great annual fair for that district of the county was held at Middlemoor during the first three days of the month of October. Horses, cattle, and sheep, covered all the approaches to the town for weeks beforehand, and amongst the numerous throng attracted to the place it commonly happened that there was a strong effusion of loose and unscrupulous characters; hawkers, gipsies, itinerant players, wandering tinkers, pedlars, vagrants, beggars, and others whose avocation was even less decent than these last. Sylvan Holt had generally either ordered Margaret to keep close quarters during the time the country was thus over-run, or else had taken her out under his own immediate escort: but this year, having much business to transact at the fair, he rode to Middlemoor the first day, intending to stay over the night at the "Old Horn," and return the following evening. Margaret was thus cast on her own resources for two whole days; and though she contrived to stay about the Grange on the first, on the second, Jacky caught her ready prepared to steal down the hill very soon after breakfast. The servant immediately stopped her, bade her remember what she knew her father desired her to do, and begged her to remain at home, adding that she had seen two ill-looking fellows come down over the moor a little while before, and who knew but they might insult her? Margaret looked perverse, patted Oscar confidently on the head, and asked him who would dare to meddle with her when he was by? "Why, you know, Jacky, Oscar would pull a man down in a moment if I only gave him the word; aye, and hold him to the day of doom," said she, caressing her gigantic favourite. "I do not believe that even my father would be a match for him, and consider *his* strength!"

"May be not: Oscar 'd be a dangerous brute to rouse," the servant acknowledged; "but, for all that, I'd a deal rather you'd bide at home. There's been four men lurking round here for ever so many days; they've touched nought yet, an' so, I guess they're looking out for greater gains. One o' them

came to t' door stane begging yesterday morning while master was i' t' kitchen telling Tom to meet him over at Middlemoor; an' t' same fellow came again to-day when I was my lane washing, as early as five o'clock, an' asked if he could have speech o' t' Squire; I telled him he wasn't at home, an' sent him awa' wi' a flea i' his lug. It was work he was wanting, he said—as if I was to be caught wi' chaff like *that*!”

“And perhaps the poor creature did want work, Jacky,” Margaret charitably insisted.

“Pigs may fly, but they're vara unlikely birds,” was the servant's sarcastic retort, and then she added with great seriousness—

“I've telled mester oft that it's tempting thieves an' robbers to carry so much money about him as he does, or to keep so much i' t' house. You suld speak to himself, or t' next news 'll be we sal' have t' Grange broken into, an' some fine night he'll fall in wi' bad company as he rides home—this night of all nights, perhaps, for fra' what I heard him tell Tom I know he'll ha' a heavy pouch to bring back—an' I'm not sure that lurking fellow didn't hear too.”

“What ails you, Jacky? Are you turning coward in your old age, or have you had a warning in a dream?” asked Margaret, laughing.

“Never heed what I ha' had, bairn,” replied Jacky, deeply affronted; “you suldn't make a mock at spiritual things—it's disrespectful.”

“But I must go to Mill Cottage, Jacky; I missed my lessons yesterday, and what will Mrs. Sinclair think?” was Margaret's next plea.

“Mrs. Sinclair 'll gie you a holiday, an' be fain too! you're such a plague!”

“Oh! Jacky, now I *will* go! but to spare your fears you shall see what I'll carry with me!” and away she flew to her father's room, and presently returned bringing a beautiful silver mounted pistol, a powder flask, and some bullets in her hands. She then proceeded to load the pistol, while Jacky stood by perfectly aghast. “Now, watch! I'm going to fire, and tell me if I'm not a good shot,” cried she, taking aim at a wooden trencher that was reared up on a shelf above the dresser at the further end of the great kitchen.

“Bairn, bairn, you're surely gane daft!” shrieked the servant, but Margaret only laughed, and holding back the rough

red hand put out to stop her, she fired and hit her mark. Jacky collapsed into the chair with a groan. "Did ever mortal see the like o' that?" asked she; "but would you shoot a fellow cretur, Margaret?"

"If the fellow creature laid finger on me or mine, surely I would;" and as Margaret spoke she set her lips together in a way that looked, as Jacky observed, as if she meant mischief.

"That's not t' meek face you show to Colonel Fielding, Marg'ret; if he could see you now he'd be skeared."

"No, he would not. He knows I can shoot, for I told him so myself—and he said he should like me to leave it off. Must I fire again, Jacky? I believe I could take that tall bow from the top of your cap without hurting you."

But Jacky wisely declined to afford her the opportunity, and fled into the pantry, where she deemed it prudent to remain shut up until she saw Oscar and his wilful young mistress marching leisurely down the hill towards Wildfoot.

Arrived at Mill Cottage, Margaret did her lessons duly and truly, kept Mrs. Sinclair company a part of the afternoon, and then went on to Oakfield, where she stayed to tea. When it began to gloom over towards evening Mrs. Joan Clervaux had to remind her that it was her ordinary time for returning home; but Margaret said, her father had told her that he should come from Middlemoor by the low road, so she would listen for his going by, and join him as he passed. They therefore sat by the glass-door with the curtains undrawn, and watched for a considerable time, but as it grew later and later, and still he did not appear, the possibility that he might have altered his intention suggested itself, and further delay seemed useless. Mrs. Joan said all the men had been busy in the harvest field since day-break, but James Groves had better see her safe to the Grange; it proved, however, on inquiry, that James, tired with his day's work, was already gone to bed, and that the other men, gardener and Robbie Clarke, were at their own homes in the village. Consequently there was no alternative for her but either to go alone or to accept the companionship of the melancholy Jaques; and her protection Margaret declined as worse than none, on the plea that she screamed if a leaf did but rustle and fainted if a hare started up in her path. "Besides, look here, Mrs. Joan," said she, exhibiting her pistol, which she loaded and stuck into her belt; "Jacky took it into her head that the country is not safe at Middlemoor fair time,

so I brought this to spare her fears. And there is Oscar lying outside in the hall."

Mrs. Joan smiled at her deadly preparations for defence in case of attack, but said that for her part she should be disposed to place more reliance on Oscar's fangs than the pistol. "But I do not think there is any danger likely to assail you, Gipsy, or I would not let you go," added she kissing her good-bye; "unless, indeed, you choose to take fright at the Grey Lady at Wildfoot."

Margaret went laughing out at the hall-door, declaring that the Grey Lady had no terrors for her now, and with Oscar at her heels she was quickly out on the road that led to the Grange.

The Grey Lady alluded to was the heroine of one of Jacky's Mirkdale legends, which stated that a certain Lady Avice Langland, long, long ago, went down from the Grange one night to meet her lover by stealth at Wildfoot; and that in the morning she was found by her favourite dog lying dead under the trees—stabbed to the heart by her own brother: and ever since, the story went on to say, she had haunted the skirts of the wood and the edge of Black Beck in the form of a mist-tinted wraith, that wailed and shrieked dismally in the dead of night. But Margaret was a high-couraged creature who did not know what fear meant: the thought of the mysterious awful Grey Lady did not alarm her in the least; and as she went along Beckford lane she amused herself with fancying that, if she should meet any prowlers, what fun it would be to act the ghost, for as lawless men are commonly arrant cowards where supernatural things are concerned, she made no doubt but that they would fly from her. "And you, Oscar, keep close, and then you will pass for the gaunt hound that discovered her body, and afterwards howled himself to skin and bone upon her grave," said she in a low whisper, followed by a soft little laugh.

They were just entering on the fir-tree glade, where, notwithstanding the bright moonlight beyond, a thick darkness reigned. There was not, however, any risk of losing the track, for the trees closed up on either side like a green wall. It is true that here and there a white bar of moonshine broke through the dense boughs overhead and made a line across the pathway, but it was generally a groping progression through the glade by night even to those most accustomed to traverse it. Margaret moved slowly and cautiously, for, in thinning the

plantation and forming the road originally, many short stumps of saplings had been left which it was not easy to avoid stumbling over if the foot caught them: and for better guidance than her own sight vouchsafed she kept her hand on Oscar's collar.

When nearing the end of the glade she thought she heard voices a short distance off, and paused, while Oscar emitted a low growl.

"Quiet, sir; down!" whispered she authoritatively, and the animal crouched at her feet: for a few minutes she stood listening intently. Certainly they were voices—several men's voices—in low-toned stealthy conversation, and the sounds proceeded from a little way above the bridle-gate and stile at Wildfoot. From the point where her steps had been arrested to the termination of the wood-walk the way lay open and direct, but to reach home by that route Margaret knew she would be obliged to pass by the very spot under the woodside where the men were lurking—with what evil intent Jacky's suggestions in the morning chilled her to think: or, perhaps, she reflected, they might only be poachers snaring game; but even poachers are dangerous men to disturb when engaged in their midnight depredations. While she stood debating in her own mind whether she should turn back, and give warning at Greatorix Mills for some one to stop her father in case he had not already passed, the clatter of horse's hoofs coming up by the wood caught her ear: she immediately ran forward, relying on Oscar for her own protection, and reached the mouth of the glade just as the moonlight showed her father coming through the bridle-gate followed by Colonel Fielding. At the same instant, and before she had time to utter her warning, a shot was fired from the wood and four men rushed out upon them. The foremost instantly attempted to seize Sylvan Holt's bridle, but he brought his heavy handled whip down upon his assailant's head, and Faustus, startled by the shot, wheeling round and plunging violently, he was shaken off, and Oscar springing fiercely upon him bore him to the ground in a moment. Two of the others, evidently cowed by the addition of the ferocious dog to the number of their intended prey, stood irresolute, while the fourth, a very big and powerfully built man, having got possession of the Colonel's bridle, was loudly threatening him with instant death if he did not at once give up all the valuables he had about him. Margaret perceived that he had

a weapon in his hand, but of what nature she could not discover, and quick as thought she drew out her pistol and fired, hitting him in the shoulder. He dropped his uplifted arm with a yell of pain and was turning round to revenge himself, when Margaret gave Oscar a word, and he, having apparently mauled his first antagonist to his heart's content, left him on the ground and assailed the wounded man whose pistol, for such it was, he fired at the dog as he seized him, but ineffectually.

"Call your dog off, he'll throttle me!" gurgled he with the addition of an oath, and using his weapon to endeavour to beat off the animal; but Oscar's blood was now at savage boiling point and he held him fast, growling dangerously until he overpowered and dragged him to the ground. Several shots were fired from under cover of the wood by the other two ruffians, but none of them successfully, and seeing themselves foiled in their murderous intentions they decamped in all haste, leaving their comrades to fend for themselves as best or worse they could. The moment Sylvan Holt had found himself at liberty he had dismounted, and turned Faustus loose to find his own way to his stable; and Jacky, whom the report of the firing had already startled while sitting by her fireside in the house-place, was sure something must be seriously amiss when the riderless horse came galloping into the yard. She quickly unchained Matt, the house-dog, took her master's gun, which looked formidable though she forgot the ammunition, and screaming to Anty up in the stable-loft to come away after her as fast as he could, she set off down to Wildfoot. Oscar had not permitted either of the men to rise, when she appeared on the scene, but the conflict was over, and Sylvan Holt, Margaret, and Colonel Fielding were standing together consulting as to what must be done with their half-worried prisoners.

"Done wi' em?" cried Jacky, on hearing the difficulty, "done wi' em, indeed! up to t' Grange wi' em, to be sure, an' put 'em under lock and key till t' morn. Are you hurt, master?"

Nobody was hurt, they assured her, and Margaret whispered aside with a little air of excitement and triumph, as she exhibited her dainty but trusty weapon, that it had been an even battle, four to four, and they had won! Jacky lifted up her hands in astonishment and said, "surely there'd been a Providence in it; but how long did they mean to bide there, till half a score mair o' these ne'er-do-weels came and slaughtered

them all?" and holding back Oscar by the collar, she sternly bade the two miscreants get upon their legs and trudge. No one gainsaid her commands, so Matt and Oscar took the precious pair under their convoy, while Jacky marched close behind, pointing her harmless weapon first at the back of one and then of the other, admonishing them also from time to time that if they attempted to run she would give them a "clout on t' head wad stop 'em." Coming through the last gate they met the prudent and dilatory Anty armed with a flail, a nice handy tool which he stated he had "clicked up" directly he heard Jacky call.

"Eh," cried the servant, sarcastically, "here's t' mon wha 's always first at a fray an' last at a feast; an't ye, Anty?"—poor Anty being notoriously the reverse. "Run, ye'll do that out o' harm's way, I knaw, run an' bring t' key o' t' loose box where puir Crosspatch used to bide, an we'll put these two pretty fellows i' there, master, till ye bring 'em up afore Sir Thomas Rowley; they'll be safe enew there, an' no risk o' 'em firing t' Grange or t' ricks."

Margaret suggested that the doctor ought to be sent for, as one of them was wounded and both seriously bitten—a proposal which Jacky received with intense scorn. "Let 'em sup as they ha' brewed; it's not lang they'll need doctering. Highway robbery's a hanging matter," announced she.

"Hold your peace, Jacky!" exclaimed her young mistress; "we are none of us hurt. Father, let Anty go to Beckford for Macmichal, will you? I did it, you know," and she touched his hand with the muzzle of the little pistol.

"Ye'll none get Anty to trust his bonnie self to Beckford this night," retorted Jacky; "an if Macmichal's i' his warm bed he'll no come."

"I will go at once, Margaret, if you wish it," Colonel Fielding proposed, "and bring him back with me."

"Ye'll do nought o' t' sort!" interposed the servant, angrily; "if these varmin's to be pettled like babies, I'll gae mysel' for t' doctor; you'd maybe get a sly shot as ye went, but there's no' a man i' all Mirkdale wad think Jacky worth robbing."

They had now reached the door of the loose box, and Anty arriving with the key and his lanthorn, it was unlocked, and the men marched in, Oscar taking up his post of guard on the threshold unbidden. There was plenty of straw in the place, and one of the men appeared to be extremely glad to drop into

it. Anty flashed the light of his lanthorn upon his face, which, under a shock of ragged black hair, looked fearfully ghastly. There was nothing of the picturesque ruffian about either of them; they had the air of coarse bullies—half horsebreaker, half tramp—but still they were human creatures, and Margaret felt a sickening commiseration for their sufferings. She told Jacky to bring them some water, which the servant reluctantly did, presenting it with the comfortable remark—

“You brought it on yourselves, you know, you especially;”—this was to the man whom Margaret had wounded—“but I’ll gae down to Macmichal, an’ he’ll see what he can do for ye, puir, miserable, misguided, wicked bodies that ye are.”

“There, Jacky, there, don’t read us a homily now, but if you are going, go at once, or I shall set off myself!” exclaimed Margaret, impatiently. The sight of physical torture was new and very painful to her, as was evident from the expression of her countenance; and Colonel Fielding, taking hold of her hand, which burnt and trembled, drew her to a short distance out of view of their prisoners. Her father followed her, and urged her to go in-doors, adding that there was nothing so serious the matter that she need terrify herself; and Jacky in her red hooded cloak having passed by them on her way to Beckford, she allowed herself to be led as far as the shelter of the porch, but no further; she would wait to see Mr. Macmichal come, she said, so Sylvan Holt left her there with the Colonel and returned to the men, the situation of one of whom seemed to be growing critical, though he made strenuous efforts to suppress the heavy groans that laboured from his chest.

Margaret was now wrought up to that state of excitement that it was impossible for her to keep silence:

“I am not terrified,” said she, in reference to her father’s remark; “why should I be terrified? It is wretched to see that man’s agony, but he was threatening your life, Colonel Fielding, and I hope I would have courage to do the same thing again in the same circumstances.”

Colonel Fielding clasped her hot slender fingers very closely in his own; “You are a brave, prompt, little heroine, and would make a true soldier’s wife,” said he, eagerly. “Listen, Margaret,—could you be *my* wife? Could you love me enough?” He bent to catch her reply, but she made none: only he could feel that a quick, shivering thrill ran through

her to the very tips of her fingers: he was angry at himself; he feared that he had been too premature, or that he had chosen his moment ill, but the chance was risked now, and must be carried through to one conclusion or another. "I love you dearly, very dearly, Margaret," he was beginning, when she stopped him and said in an excited, breathless way, but still with pauses of hesitation and a burning face, "Oh! I know you do love me, and I should like to belong to you, but ——"

"I will not have any *but*; you shall belong to me, my own darling, spite of that obtrusive little word!" exclaimed he, delighted and impetuous, and he would have thrown his arm round her in the eager joy of the moment had she not drawn herself aside with a certain air of coldness and tremulous dignity that repressed all demonstration of warm feeling.

"You *must* listen to me," said she, trembling visibly; "you must let me speak. Have you ever heard my mother's history?"

The question was one so strange for her to ask, and so wholly unexpected, that the Colonel continued silent for a second or two, with her shy beautiful eyes looking up into his face: at last he answered gravely, "Yes, Margaret; I have known it all along;" and just at that instant Sylvan Holt came up and joined them in the porch.

A hurried conversation about the night's adventure immediately ensued, and this theme held them until Jacky's lantern was seen shining in the distance, and Dr. Macmichal came trotting up the hill mounted on his old grey horse. Margaret waited long enough to hear that the wound she had inflicted, though severe, was not dangerous, and then quietly escaped to her own room; and Jacky having of her own accord prudently summoned the Beckford constable to come up and take charge of the prisoners, Sylvan Holt and Colonel Fielding were now relieved from their responsible post of watchers. As he entered the parlour the Colonel glanced round in search of Margaret, and was disappointed to find her gone. When the doctor soon after joined them, he also wanted to see and congratulate her on her admirable behaviour, for which he had conceived a strong admiration, but on Jacky's being sent with a message to that effect, she reported that her mistress declined coming down-stairs any more, and wished them all a very good night; the Colonel, therefore, though pressed to stay and par-

take of the supper which was ready on the table, left the Grange almost immediately, reflecting that if he had brought affairs to a crisis rather precipitately at last, Margaret was one of those affectionate, plastic charactered women whom he could soon mould to love him as fondly and as faithfully as he desired. It was with a pleasant sensation of self-gratulation that he dwelt on that childish little expression of hers, that she would like to "belong to him," and he vowed within himself that when she did belong to him he would do his utmost to make her innocent heart as happy as it deserved to be. Then, suddenly, in the midst of these thoughts, recurred to him certain torturing reminiscences of Frances Stanley—the woman of all women to him, whose love ought to have crowned his life: and this seemed no treachery to Margaret, for what was best and sweetest and dearest to him in her inevitably recalled that earlier passion whose disappointment it was beyond his power to forget. But that this night of all others, immediately after he had won an avowal from Margaret's lips, tempting sad visions of Frances Stanley should rise up to eclipse her, was strange and cruel indeed. Every pleasant thought of Margaret was traversed by one still dearer, still fonder, of Frances. If Margaret was beautiful, had not Frances been softly, graciously lovely? If Margaret was innocent and affectionate, had not Frances been the warmest-hearted and tenderest of women? If Margaret was faithful, steadfast, and courageous, had not Frances been devoted too? Frances had borne the harshness and reproach of parents and friends for many all but hopeless years, and had been true to him until self-sacrifice seemed compulsory upon her to save from dire poverty those near and dear to her by ties of kindred: reluctantly she had yielded to what she looked on as stern necessity—as almost virtuous obligation, perhaps—but he knew by his own heart that she still regretted him even as he regretted her: but Margaret's faith was untried; her fortune ran so smoothly that she was permitted to pledge her girl's life to him without a single cross; possibly, he might have set a more precious value on her young love had he had to battle with greater difficulties in the winning of it; for sincere as was his affection for her, sincere as were his intentions to make her future existence, so far as it depended on himself, happy and unshadowed, he felt—and acknowledged that he felt—she had not over him the all-pervading, vital influence that Frances Stanley's memory still exercised.

It was a critical and unwise thing for him to yield to these tender recollections of his lost love just when he had resolved to elect Margaret to the wife's place in his heart: that love—living but separated from him irremediably, and still enhaloed by every charm that makes life glorious—was, indeed, a most dangerous rival for Margaret, though she knew it not. There was, however, this hope for her—that she might grow dearer to him as his wife than she was now; and, for her sake, we will encourage this hope, because there is no conscientious avoidance of coldness, no mere effort of duty, that can fill the place of a warm and single-hearted love.

While Colonel Fielding went down the moonlit pastures towards his temporary home, dreaming of his past and present, as we have endeavoured to indicate, Margaret Holt lay reclining on the broad low window-seat of her bedroom, with the blind up, to look out over the valley, and her mind filled with a strange yet happy confusion of thoughts. Long after the house was still she stayed there, recalling with a proud and tender delight how he had said that he loved her dearly; she was almost afraid of her exultation, lest it should vanish with its source, like an unsubstantial dream, at the touch of the morning light, for there was nothing of earthly suspicion of fear in all her knowledge of him; he was just the bearded knight of her childish romance, whom she was ready to follow round the world on a packsaddle, or to live for or die for as fate should determine.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MARGARET'S HERO.

COLONEL FIELDING came up to Wildwood the following morning so early, on the pretext of inquiring after Sylvan Holt and his daughter, that Jacky was only just beginning her preparations for breakfast. He was asked to stay, and though Margaret did not appear, as he came in that intent, he was easily prevailed on to do so. Being alone with his host, the Colonel did not hesitate a moment to tell him what had passed in the

previous night after the affray at Wildfoot. Sylvan Holt heaved a great sigh, and said he supposed that was what it must come to sooner or later. "But," added he, "I cannot bear suspense; you must get her positive yea or nay at once, and if it be *yea*—well, you must take her;" and with that ungracious permission he stalked gloomily out of the room, and round by the backway into the foldyard, leaving Colonel Fielding alone in the summer parlour.

Margaret heard her father's retreating step, and presently she came stealing down-stairs, and called softly, "Jacky, are they gone?"

"Wha's *they*?" responded Jacky from the dairy.

"My father and Colonel Fielding."

"Yes, they're gone," said the servant, salving over her Jesuitical conscience who knows how, for what she esteemed an expedient lie. Margaret, thereupon, went into the kitchen, and taking from the table a piece of bread to crumb for her birds upon the window-sill, she entered the parlour singing softly out of the full joy of her young heart. Colonel Fielding, who had heard her approach, advanced hastily to meet her as she appeared at the door, and possessed himself of her empty hand, which she suffered him to retain, though she stood before him trembling and changing colour rapidly all the time.

"I thought you were gone, and I came to feed my birds," said she.

"You would not avoid me, Margaret? I am here by your father's leave to know if you have reflected on what I said to you last night,—I have not forgotten a single word, dearest!" replied the Colonel.

Margaret was looking her bonniest, as Jacky would have said; that shy, confused, yet happy expression became her well, and her brief, hesitating "Yes," was somehow fuller of genuine feeling than many a volume of burning protestations.

While watching her face Colonel Fielding forgot everything but her exceeding beauty, and was moved by it to his ancient enthusiasm and fervour:

"You will be my brave, sweet wife! I will try to make you happy,—can you trust me, dear love?" said he.

Margaret repeated her trembling significant little "Yes," and then suddenly looked up into his face—not doubtingly, and not fearfully, but with an expression of inquiry.—Could the regretful thought of Frances Stanley, which at that instant

flashed into his mind, have by any subtle affinity struck a chill to hers? If it had, it passed as swiftly as it came, and was succeeded by that recollection which always sent the blood in a burning tide to her brow—the recollection of her mother.

Was it not most strange, she thought, that Colonel Fielding, so well known, so good, so proud, so honourable, should seek her as his wife with that ineffaceable stain upon her name, while there were other girls, better and cleverer than herself, with no mother's shame to cause them a blush. She wanted to hear him say again that he "had known it all along," so that the assurance of his having loved her in spite of it might be made doubly sure; but she shrank from touching on the theme again in words. Colonel Fielding had studied her character closely; he knew its pure simplicity and generous frankness well, and for a moment her excessive confusion troubled and annoyed him. He endeavoured to explain it to himself by thinking what a child she still was in age and inexperience, but, at last, it occurred to him that the restless uneasy feeling betrayed by her shyness of him arose out of the last night's allusion to her poor, lost mother's miserable history. Without encountering any resistance he drew her hand through his arm, and saying that he wished to talk to her unreservedly, led her out upon the turf in front of the house where, with the faithful Oscar dodging them to and fro, they continued to walk for a considerable time. With very delicate tact, the Colonel presently elicited Margaret's confession of her wretched stung feelings when she first heard the lamentable story of her mother's fate, and of her abiding and oppressive weight of shame since; all her bitterness and unforgiving resentment she showed him, too, but she listened to his answering arguments with much more patience than she had accorded to those of either her father or Mrs. Joan Clervaux; perhaps because he was one quite distinct from them, and a representative of that separate world whose harsh judgments she had anticipated with fear and trembling. But the most convincing argument that he had in it his power to advance was how he himself sought her for his wife. He made her promise that she would try henceforward to keep herself out of that cold shadow, instead of dwelling under it voluntarily; and her confession and promise given, and met with such gentle remonstrances and tender soothing words, as none knew better than Colonel Fielding how to apply effectually, Margaret's heart was once again at

peace in itself, and she turned her thoughts away from her mother's memory with less of rancour than she had ever felt before.

Sylvan Holt, meanwhile, was gone down into the horse pasture, whence, for an hour and more, he saw Colonel Fielding and Margaret pacing in front of the Grange. He grew a little impatient and jealous of the sight at length, and thought that the interview had lasted long enough, so he went back home, and admonished his daughter, as if nothing more than ordinary had happened, that Mrs. Sinclair must be expecting her for her lessons at Mill Cottage. Margaret's countenance now reflected the perfect peace and happiness within, such a peace and happiness as had been strangers to it for many a day, yet still Sylvan Holt felt angry, miserable, and unreasonable, and again wished most devoutly that the Colonel had never won his reluctant consent to woo his daughter—but the mischief was done past mending now.

"Anty is preparing to drive those two men to Bransby; you and I must ride over there at once, Colonel Fielding," said he, abruptly. This was a piece of business that could neither be deferred nor left undone, therefore the Colonel submitted with an ill grace to his change of company, while Margaret, also regretfully, went in-doors to collect her books.

"Well, Colonel, I need scarcely ask what my daughter said to you—you look successful," Sylvan Holt observed, rather bitterly, as soon as she was beyond hearing.

"She will be my wife"—was the reply, with an intense though quiet air of triumph, which would almost have satisfied Mrs. Joan Clervaux's exacting notions of what a lover's manner and sentiment should be.

"Well, well," gasped her father, beating nervously with his hand against the side of the porch; "it is done now, and I cannot alter it; but I wish I had no misgivings." He seemed very anxious and excited, and the Colonel began to assure him in all good faith, that he need have no fears for her with him, for he would devote his life to her happiness.

"And I promised not to stand in the way of it, and have kept my pledge—mind how you make me regret it," replied Sylvan Holt. "She is capricious and wayward when thwarted, and she has never known the curb, but she is sterling at heart. Deal gently with her, Colonel, as well for your own sake as for hers."

Colonel Fielding promised earnestly that he would, asseverating that Margaret's faults were so many charms for him, which loverlike sentiment provoked a grim smile on her father's lips. "May you always be of that mind," responded he.

Their horses having been brought round, the two gentlemen mounted, and followed the cart, which had started some time before. Margaret, hidden behind the window curtain, watched them go down the hill, and noticed that Colonel Fielding looked back often to the Grange as long as he remained in sight of it. This action of his reminded her of the departing knights in some of Jacky's ballads, whom personally he resembled, and she herself of the dear ladye-love left behind. "Oh!" thought she, "Oh! what should I feel if he were to be years away instead of hours!" and she could even afford to laugh at the phantom sorrow she had evoked, because it was so unreal and she was so full of heart-content.

The inquisitive Jacky, who had prevised some great event, came up after her master was gone, and caught Margaret at her stealthy watch; conscience-smitten, the girl dropped the curtain from her hand and crimsoned violently; neither act escaped the servant's shrewd eye:

"What's ado now, bairn, that you must blush for me? Wha's up o' t' hill?" said she, going to the window just in time to see her master and the Colonel take the turn round by Wildfoot. "Has t' Colonel left somewhat behind that he makes a stand?" asked she, glancing significantly at Margaret, who smiled as she observed him rein in his horse a moment and look back: "I guess he has—eh? My bonnie 'll surely ha' no secrets from her auld Jacky. Is she going after all to be a soldier's wife?" Margaret's face made confession for her, and the faithful servant would give her a good-luck kiss, adding warmly, "Jacky's blessing on ye baith! Ye'll be the sightliest pair Beckford church ever saw."

The privileged servant could not, however, be content with giving Margaret her blessing: she must needs offer advice also:

"Mind, bairn, *mind*, you're not tempted to play off any skitish tricks on t' Colonel," said she with extreme seriousness.

Margaret laughed merrily at the suggestion conveyed in the shape of warning: "You naughty Jacky, you have put it into my head!" cried she; "I never thought of such a thing before; but I promise not to tease, because I daren't, Jacky."

"You're not feared at him ever, are you, Margaret?" Jacky inquired eagerly; "you suldn't be *feared*, bairn——"

"I am not exactly that—but when he looks so grand and cold as he sometimes does, I feel as if I never could be sufficient for him. Do you understand, Jacky, dear? I feel as if I were so weak and childish to him, as if I never could be sufficient to *love* him. I don't know yet whether I have really won into his heart altogether—I don't think I quite know him yet."

These very simple and hesitating remarks amused Jacky extremely. "Know him, bairn! I suld be surprised if ye did," said she laughing, "why you may be married to him and live wi' him a score o' years wi'out doing *that*. Men say we'se past finding out, but I'm sure *they* are. My advice is, don't be like Eve—ower curious after hidden knowledge; you know enough to make any woman as proud an' happy as a queen when you know such a grand honorable gentleman as Colonel Fielding loves you, an' is going to mak' you t' wife o' his heart;" having uttered which profound and beautiful sentiment Jacky retired exultant to her own quarters, leaving Margaret in a gentle flutter of excitement and happiness, not unmingled with awe at this crisis in her fate.

Mrs. Sinclair had to forego the pleasure or trouble of her pupil's society that day, for on second thoughts Margaret left her books at home and went down to Oakfield to see Mrs. Joan Clervaux. The moment she entered her excellent old friend's presence a tell-tale shy look came over her eyes, and spared her the speech of announcement and confession that she had been concocting as she came through Wildwood. "I know all about it, Gipsy," immediately said Mrs. Joan, "but sit down and disburden your mind."

Thus exhorted, Margaret did sit down, but she said just nothing at all. "Well, Margaret, I am waiting to hear: are you tongue-tied?" added the old lady, significantly. "But, first, tell me about this affray at Wildfoot last night, for a most wonderful exaggerated account has come down to us here. For instance, somebody says that you shot a man!"

"So I did—shot him in the shoulder," replied Margaret, quietly.

"You bloodthirsty little heathen! what did you do. that for?" And Margaret proceeded to tell her tale. Mrs. Joan shuddered: "Why, Gipsy, your father had a marvellously nar-

row escape!" said she. "They did not expect the Colonel, or Oscar and you, depend upon it. It was certainly a most merciful providence that you came down here yesterday with the dog. Your story reminds me of a similar attack that was once made on my grandfather near the same place—only he was robbed, and left for dead upon the ground. Well, and I hope all the miscreants were caught."

Margaret said that two had made off, and that the other two were gone for examination before Sir Thomas Rowley that morning.

"And I trust they will be committed for trial and sent over seas; I would have the country purged of all such rascals," returned Mrs. Joan, severely. "And now, Gipsy, that being disposed of, let me into the secret of your own private doings—what has been going on at the Grange lately?"

At first Margaret was inclined to say, "Nothing particular," but on Mrs. Joan's suggesting "A new edition of an old story, perhaps," she blushed an affirmative. "And are you glad, Margaret? Do you feel in your conscience that you are doing right, and that there is a fair prospect of happiness before you?" the old lady asked with affectionate earnestness.

Margaret replied unhesitatingly that she esteemed herself the happiest creature in the universe. "But why should he have chosen *me*, Mrs. Joan? I cannot half understand it—when he might have chosen so much better," said she, nestling down at her old friend's feet, and resting her cheek against her knee. Mrs. Joan bade her not bring her enigmas there for solution, for she could never guess a riddle in her life. Margaret, however, pressed her to give some explanation.

"I suppose, child, he fancies you—it is all fancy that begins these things, and I consider that he has made a very fair selection," said the old lady, stroking her favourite's bright head. "I think Margaret Holt is Rupert Fielding's equal any day."

"No, no; don't say that!" exclaimed Margaret. "I like to think there is not his equal in the whole wide world!"

"Woman-like you are going to fall into the sin of hero-worship. Far be it from me to undervalue a faithful love, which is of all God's blessings most blessed, but still, Gipsy, remember that you may be overblinded by your own fondness. Rupert Fielding is a good man and true, but he is human like the rest of us; and being human he must have his faults and his weaknesses."

"But need *I* see them?" asked Margaret, mischievously.

Mrs. Joan could not forbear smiling: "Oh! Gipsy, you are ready to quote me against myself!" said she, shaking her head reproachfully.

"Yes, if you begin to contradict your former sentiments. It was you who once said that wives should be blind, dumb, and deaf to their husbands' errors."

"Ah! it was in a moment of enthusiasm, when that silly woman Mrs. Macmichal was magnifying a trifling flaw in the temper of the doctor, who is one of the most genuinely good men I ever remember to have known. But that is not what I mean when I warn you not to begin by making an idol of Rupert Fielding, or else while you are thinking he is all pure gold, some day the feet of clay will peep out——"

"Oh! no, they won't!" interrupted Margaret, rising from her humble seat and shedding back the hair from her face; "I know they won't, for he is not like other people. He is proud, and he *can* be stern, but all else in him is *good*; I am sure of it!"

Mrs. Joan sighed, and said she was a headstrong creature, who did not deserve to have advice lavished upon her, and while they were mooting that point they saw Sylvan Holt and Colonel Fielding return up the road from Bransby Park. They therefore went down to the gate to learn the issue of the examination, and were told that the men were committed for trial.

"But Sir Thomas did it very reluctantly," added Sylvan Holt. "He would have dealt summarily with the matter, and have sent the men to gaol as vagrants for a month, if Saunders, the constable, had not testified to their being old offenders. Sir Thomas is lenient to everybody but a poacher or a tenant who destroys a fox—and him he never pardons."

"The magistrate also considers Oscar a most dangerous animal, and counsels his being chained up, Margaret," said the Colonel.

"Then I am sure he must come and do it himself, for no one at Wildwood can," replied she.

"You ought to have gone in person to Bransby that you might have profited by his severe animadversions on the practice of young ladies carrying fire-arms. He considers it undignified and unfeminine, and tantamount to levying war in her Majesty's dominions. He was in doubt for some time as to whether you also ought not to be brought before him charged with the offence of shooting with intent to inflict

grievous bodily harm; but his clerk explained that you fired in defence of an innocent person who was attacked, so you had the benefit of the doubt; but when I told him how much I was obliged to you, he was facetious at our expense." Mrs. Joan Clervaux was talking a little apart to Sylvan Holt, so the Colonel availed himself of the opportunity of asking Margaret where and how she was going to spend the rest of the day, "for," said he, "if you are returning to the Grange I will ride forward with your father, but if you are going to stay here I shall beg Mrs. Joan to let me stay too."

Margaret's face was a perfect tell-tale; she could not help blushing with pleasure at a question which showed that the Colonel felt that he had a right to be with her. "I am going back home very soon," she replied; "and if my father is on the moor this afternoon I shall be there also." Colonel Fielding said, then he would ride home and bring his gun and join them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE BITTER-SWEET OF LIFE.

IF Sylvan Holt had found it a cause of complaint that since Colonel Fielding's appearance in Mirkdale his daughter had scarcely seemed to belong to him, he might now have considered himself doubly and trebly aggrieved, for after their engagement they were almost perpetually together. Notwithstanding Sir Thomas Rowley's solemn strictures, Mirkdale chose to make a heroine of Margaret Holt, and when it was known that she was actually to marry Colonel Fielding there was a perfect enthusiasm for her. People came to call at the Grange who had never called before, and though none of them, except Miss Bell Rowley, gained admittance, still the Holts were no longer regarded as out of the pale of civilized society. Miss Bell Rowley, with her natural audacity and disregard of difficulties, contrived to force her way within the doors of the long sealed house, and promulgated in the presence of Sylvan Holt an invitation to his daughter to join her coming-of-age birthnight party at Bransby Park. Margaret was startled, but the idea

was far from being disagreeable to her; and Bell, perceiving that, began ingeniously to smooth away all minor difficulties.

"You can come with Mrs. Joan Clervaux, who has promised me her company. I'll tell you what, you shall stay all night. Mrs. Joan will stay all night, and one room will do for you. We shall have the house full to the roof, for I am resolved to have a good thing, that all the valley shall talk of, while I am about it!" Bell was in earnest to get her will, and Margaret's excuses were very faint, so at last Sylvan Holt said, "If you would like it, Maggie, go—Colonel Fielding can scarcely object!"

"Colonel Fielding object! I should think it quite time enough for him to dictate when he is master!" said Bell, sarcastically. "Besides, he will be asked to come himself, and then if he is afraid he will be there to look after you."

Margaret coloured slightly at hearing Bell's impertinent insinuations, and said she could not decide without first consulting Mrs. Joan Clervaux—"For you know that I have never been out to a large party in my life before," added she.

"Then it is time you began, and if you are kept away I shall quarrel with somebody about it, for I see you would like to come," replied Bell, and then she proceeded to draw a glowing picture of what was to take place on her birth-night. The supper, the band, the dancing, the decorations of the apartments, and the company that was to fill them, were all themes of her flowery descriptions. She told Margaret, by way of exciting her curiosity, that she could have no idea what a pretty scene a ball was until she had been at one, especially where everything was arranged as she intended it should be, and the rooms were not overcrowded, as she intended they should not be. In the midst of her oration Sylvan Holt left the parlour, and then Bell, relieved from the awe of his presence, launched all the batteries of her eloquence over Margaret to gain her promise there and then; but Margaret was firm in only speaking conditionally. "She should like to go if Mrs. Joan Clervaux would take her, and Colonel Fielding did not disapprove."

"Then rely upon me for making all right," said Bell, exultant at having won an admission strong enough to work her end. Margaret little imagined what device her persistent visitor would pitch upon, or she would not have seen her depart so gladly. On leaving the Grange, the enterprising young lady rode straight to Holm Cottage and asked if Colonel Fielding

were in-doors. On being told that he was, she sent in a message to say that she desired to see him on business of the utmost importance, and when he appeared, in a tone half-jest, half-earnest, she demanded to know whether he intended making a nun of Margaret Holt? The Colonel looked puzzled, as well he might, and required explanation, which Bell gave in the following terms.

"She wants to come to Bransby on my birth-day, and she says she dare not promise without getting your leave first. She is thoroughly afraid of you, I can tell—I don't believe she dare say her soul's her own without meekly entreating your permission. Ha, ha!"

Colonel Fielding ought to have remembered too well what Bell Rowley's tongue was, to attach any weight to what dropped from it, but he certainly did feel chagrined that Margaret should hold him in dread, and he now replied with great hauteur and coldness—

"Tell her to please herself; I do not presume to wish that she should either go or stay away on my account!" So Bell posted back to the Grange, and called out to Margaret through the parlour window—

"Colonel Fielding says you may do as you like about my party; he cares nothing about it; so, mind, I shall expect you with Mrs. Joan Clervaux."

Bell, to do her justice, had no malicious intention in these travesties of plain speeches, only it was her way to be thus inexact, a way not seldom productive of mischief. She had not been gone ten minutes, and Margaret was still pondering in dismay on the words, "He cares nothing about it," when she saw Colonel Fielding himself coming towards the house. He looked gloomy, and was twirling his long black moustache, a trick he had when anything disturbed him. At another time Margaret would have gone to meet him in the porch, but now, restrained by an indefinable sensation of chill and doubt, she kept by the window, and as he passed by and glanced in, she feigned to be occupied with the book in her lap. Since their engagement he had taken up the practice of walking in and out of the Grange as unceremoniously as if it were his own house, and so he now appeared unannounced before Margaret. She got up, shaking, and changing colour—confirmation strong of the fear Bell Rowley had laid to his charge—and without either speaking, their eyes met.

"What have I done?" said Margaret, after a moment, for she read her accusation in his stern eyes.

"Bell Rowley has been up to me to ask my permission for you to go to Bransby; why not have spoken to me yourself instead of using her for a mediator, as if I had shown myself a tyrant towards you?"

Margaret's cheeks burned, and her eyes kindled passionately.

"If you were a tyrant I would not need to ask anything of you," said she.

Colonel Fielding had never been so near passionately loving Margaret Holt as he was now when she stood before him in a half-defiant attitude, looking at him out of her beautiful, wide-open eyes with the courage and fierceness of a young pantheress; in fact, his tone and gaze had made what Jacky called "the black drop in her boil over."

"I was mistaken, Margaret, and I beg you will forgive me," said he quite humbly; "I was pained to think you had misunderstood me, so far as to be afraid of me."

Margaret marched through the room twice or thrice with her proud young neck up and her cheek scarlet; the idea that he *could* reproach her was a grievous humiliation.

"If I had been afraid of you I would never have loved you," said she, at last, confronting him with an undaunted glance, though her lips quivered and every limb shook with emotion. Colonel Fielding began to feel a keen, stinging admiration for her, and to think that his task of taming this impetuous young nature, though more difficult, might be very sweet to him, much sweeter than he had ever dreamed. But if the idea pleased him and saved him from suffering just then, it did not save her, for when he least anticipated it she broke into a wild fit of weeping. He was so startled, and, if the truth must be told, so alarmed by her violence, that he could do nothing but entreat her to listen to him while he confessed how cruel he had been; but it was a long time before she would suffer herself to be pacified. When the spark of indignation was quite quenched in tears, and the flush on her cheek had softened, she began to look rather downcast and ashamed, and said, "I did not know Bell Rowley was going to you at all: if she had given me time I meant to ask for myself." This deprecatory explanation gave Colonel Fielding an advantage of which he was not slow to avail himself; he half rallied and half petted her until she felt as meek and happy as a naughty

but forgiven child, and asked, quite plaintively, "You are not grieved with me, then? Only tell me you are not grieved with me," as if she and not he were the aggressor.

Colonel Fielding was only too glad to take the sunny moment of opportunity to assure her he was not. "Promise me, however," said he, "promise me that you never will be afraid of me, for I could not bear it."

"I never will, unless you give me cause," was the reply.

"Then we are quite friends again?" and Colonel Fielding stopped the trembling answer with a kiss of reconciliation, through which Margaret got her first glimpse of the bitter-sweet of love.

Peace being thus restored, they began to speak of the cause of their disagreement—to wit, Bell Rowley's party. Colonel Fielding said he was going himself, and that it would double his enjoyment to see her there, nay, without her there would be no enjoyment for him; and if Mrs. Joan Clervaux would chaperone her, he should like her to go exceedingly. When it was all settled, Margaret felt more pleasure in the anticipation than any one could have supposed, and manifested an almost childish delight. Mrs. Joan readily consented to take charge of her when appealed to, and approved of her going to Bransby, so Bell Rowley had the triumphant reflection before her, that on her birth-night she should be able to show to assembled Mirkdale, the secluded maiden of Wildwood Grange whom everybody was longing to see and know since the affray with the robbers, when by her valour and promptitude, as the gossips put it, she had saved the life of her lover. Nobody was better pleased than Jacky when she heard that her mistress was going to have "a bit o' pleasuring like other young lasses."

"My bonnie, she'll beat 'em all for real beauty," said the servant, with enthusiasm; "an' what suld she like to wear? She shall be fu' as braw as any."

Margaret laughed and suggested "white satin and pearls," though at that date such vanities seemed as utterly unattainable to her as if she had wished for a robe of cloud gossamer and a tiara of stars out of heaven.

"Then white satin an' pearls sal it be!" replied Jacky, decisively. "Where money's plenty gear's no' scarce."

"Why, Jacky, you are surely gone daft!" cried her mistress.

"Can we buy white satin and pearls at Middlemoor?"

"Jacky's heard tell o' sic a place as *London*," returned the

old servant, significantly ; "Lady Frances and Philip Langland's wife they had their gowns fra' there : if I try i' my mem'ry I'll ha' t' name o' t' vara place enow—Madame Some'at it was."

"Don't talk so wildly, Jacky ! Who would send to London for a gown for me ?" Margaret asked.

"Why Sylvan Holt, my master, wad, an' Colonel Fielding wad, else he does na' deserve you. An' if Jacky has any *say* left, white satin wi' pearls sal her bonnie wear to Bransby Park ball, trust me, bairn, for that."

Margaret in reality cared very little what her dress might be, but Jacky, fully determined that she should look as "braw as any," took the first opportunity of telling her master what she had expressed a fancy for, and the result was the sending off to town of one of Margaret's best fitting garments with a liberal order for the white satin and several other robes, more suitable to the heiress of Abbeymeads and Rushfall and Colonel Fielding's future wife than to Sylvan Holt's wild young daughter. Also there came through the hands of Mistress Tibbie Ryder a small box, on opening which were discovered lying in dainty ruby velvet an exquisite set of pearl ornaments. Margaret blushed with pleasure at the sight : "For me ! are these for me ?" cried she, turning to her father, who was watching her with amusement and surprise. Sylvan Holt said nothing, but Colonel Fielding, who was also sitting by, asked her if she were fond of jewellery. The question seemed to be put with an ulterior meaning, and Margaret paused over it for a moment without answering, but at last said, "I like to look at anything beautiful." And then one after another she lifted the pretty gauds from their nests—bracelets, necklace, ear-drops, brooch, and band and pins for her hair—and held them up for admiration. She naturally thought they were her father's present, and it was her way when any one gave her anything to offer a kiss, by way of thanks, so having satisfied herself with admiring the ornaments she ran to give him her customary duty ; but Sylvan Holt, who was now, spite of himself, beginning to feel a peevish satisfaction in her happiness, put her off, saying, he had nothing to do with such trumpery, she must thank the Colonel and not him. Margaret coloured, but did not offer to transfer her homage. "Did you have them made for me ? It was very kind of you," said she, with her beautiful shy look ; "I like them extremely." Colonel Fielding caressed his mous-

tache, and enjoying her confusion, asked leave to try if the bracelets fitted. Margaret held out her wrist, and the bracelet being clasped round it, the Colonel kissed her hand before relinquishing it, and seemed to think himself well recompensed.

Although the costly ornaments were his own free will offering to Margaret, Colonel Fielding liked her best as he had first seen her—unique in her unadorned simplicity and natural refinement; he felt jealous of the approach of any commonplace vanities and frivolities lest they should sweep off the bloom from his flower, which, though it had grown up wild on the moor, was more beautiful and fragrant than many a choice hot-house plant; and yet he had not been able to deny himself the pleasure of giving her the pearls. Margaret was even more delighted by his gift than he knew, for she had an inkling of his real sentiments, and it showed her what she had not seen before—that she was gaining a certain power and influence with her hero, since he would yield his judgment to gratify her innocent whim. This knowledge might have been dangerous in the hands of some women, but it was not so in hers; she became “sweet as summer,” soft as the south-west winds in her humours; perhaps the Colonel would have liked a little tyranny or a little caprice to spice the sweet monotony of his wooing, but Margaret, after that one lover’s quarrel recorded above, never chafed any more, and grew almost dove-like for gentleness, so that Jacky sometimes said she “hardlings knows her.” She never gave him the opportunity of being offended or took offence herself; and to whatever was proposed in which she was concerned she always gave her unqualified consent—with one solitary exception that is—an exception to be touched upon again hereafter.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A RETREAT.

THERE was an interval of ten days to elapse before Bell Rowley’s coming-of-age party, which was fixed to take place on the

twenty-seventh of October—long enough for a thousand mischances to happen—and one did happen of a very grievous and disappointing character to Margaret. This was Colonel Fielding's travelling northwards, and being, in consequence, prevented from assisting at it. Margaret could not see any adequate reason for his going to Manselands just at that juncture, and tried to prevail on him to delay his journey until a few days later; but, though he expressed himself sorry to disappoint her, he told her, in a rather imperious manner, that it was impossible—he must go immediately. And accordingly he set off.

Although Margaret was left in ignorance of his reasons for quitting Mirkdale at the moment he did, we need not be so. The fact was that Colonel Fielding, as many other feeling and conscientious men might have been tempted to do in like circumstances, was only beating a politic retreat; but he could not offer this explanation of his sudden movement to Margaret Holt. He had gone over one evening to dine at Bransby Park, and in the drawing-room before dinner, Bell Rowley came to him in high glee and bade him guess what old friend of his had promised to come to her party. The Colonel guessed half a score of his male acquaintances, until, at last, she told him it was not a gentleman but a lady—it was Frances Stanley that had been—Mrs. Grant Hamilton that was.

Colonel Fielding began to fret his moustache, and said,—“Indeed, and how was she now? and Mr. Grant Hamilton, how was he?—better or worse in health?” Bell replied that *she* was quite strong again, but *he* was so bad since his last paralytic attack that he could not speak intelligibly, and that he had to be wheeled from room to room in his chair—and that her devotion to him was beautiful; everybody said she was an angel of goodness. Colonel Fielding turned away from his informant with a profound sigh, and during the whole evening he was so taciturn and abstracted, that both Sir Thomas and Lady Rowley asked repeatedly if he were ill.

The next morning he rode up to the Grange and announced to Margaret that he must go to Manselands forthwith. He was hurried and confused, and she was so grieved and astonished that neither had much to say, and they separated in a hasty manner, as if they were mutually annoyed or offended. Just as he left the house the carrier arrived, bearing the box which had come from town containing Margaret's white dress.

Jacky, impatient to see her "look grand," would not be satisfied until she had made her try it on, and as her young mistress was much too troubled to contend with her, she was presently equipped as for the ball, and was certainly of as beautiful and stately presence as any young maiden could be. Jacky retired a pace or two off to admire the general effect, and raised her clasped hands in an ecstasy of delight.

"Your father must see you, Marg'ret! Do go down in t' parlour, he'll be rare an' pleased," cried she, and then she added in a whisper, as if afraid of what she was saying, "Oh, bairn, but you are like yon picture i' master's closet; just the same lily proud neck, and just t' same sweet e'en."

Margaret uttered a passionate exclamation, and began to drag off her rich dress with a violence that threatened its destruction, until Jacky stayed her hand by force, and called out loud—

"Master, come and see how grand Margaret is i' her white satin gown an' t' Colonel's bonnie pearl ornaments!"

"How can you be so foolish, Jacky? Let me alone!" said her young mistress, with angry petulance, but as her father at the servant's summons came to the stairs foot to look at her, she went out of her room upon the landing to show herself. Such a fair, bright picture she was against the dusky background of wainscot; such a fair, bright picture as once daily haunted Wildwood Grange.

Probably Sylvan Holt saw in his daughter the same striking resemblance to her mother's portrait as Jacky had done, for after eyeing her during a minute or two he was retreating without having uttered a word, when Colonel Fielding suddenly re-appeared in the hall; he had repented of his hasty leave-taking, and was come back for a few more words of explanation.

"Look here, Colonel," said Sylvan Holt, and advancing quickly he caught one beautiful glimpse of Margaret as she ran out of sight.

"Come down, Margaret; you look like the proud young princess in the fairy tale!" cried the Colonel, charmed by the momentary vision.

But Margaret was coy, and would not. "If I were either princess or fairy I should lay my commands upon you to stay over the Bransby party," retorted she; and then shutting her door, she bade Jacky help her off with her finery, for all her anticipated pleasure in the ball was gone.

Jacky encouraged her, but, as in duty bound, she railed at Colonel Fielding for his capriciousness and uncertainty. "But never mind, my bonnie," she added, by way of consolation; "you'll ha' more liberty wi'out him. May be he'd not ha' letten you dance wi' this one an' that one."

"Dance, Jacky!" exclaimed her mistress; "you are forgetting that I don't know a single step, and that I never saw a dancer in my life, except that little girl who comes with the gipsy fiddler, and does some grotesque figures on a piece of board."

"An' that's true," said Jacky, in dismay. "But to go to a ball an' no *dance*! did ever anybody hear tell o' sic a thing? Why, I could ha' gi'en you a lesson myself, if we had but thowt on it i' time; there wasn't a lassie i' Mirkdale could foot it better than Jacky afore she got stiff an' cranky in her limbs. No dance! Oh, but you must fend to dance somehow!"

Margaret did not dare smile, for Jacky was extremely proud of her youthful accomplishments, and very touchy when they were called in question, but she said she believed there were new steps and new dances come up since her day. Perhaps there were, the servant admitted, perhaps there were, but nothing to match the old ones. "Why, marry, to see'em now they might ha' gristle for bone i' their silly legs!" said she, with asperity; "it's daft-like dancing now-a-days! a trail an' a boo an' a curchy—that's all! Why, i' my dancing days it was wha' could loup the highest. There was Michael Flox at t' mill—"

"Yes, Jacky, but you shall tell me about Michael Flox another time; I am dressed now to go down; put that white thing out of sight;" and Margaret accordingly descended to the summer parlour where Colonel Fielding was impatiently waiting for her.

"Are you come back to tell me you have changed your mind again?" said she, hopefully.

"No, Margaret; I have not come for *that* purpose," replied the Colonel; "I only came to have a little more talk with you before I go into the North—I thought you might feel I was leaving you suddenly and without due explanation."

"I did feel it so, but if you *must* go, that is reason sufficient for me. You know how much better I should like the party if you were there."

The Colonel had not wavered in his first intention, and he

did not waver now, though Margaret's eyes sought his with a pleading wistfulness. He *dare* not meet Frances Stanley under his present circumstances, and he acknowledged to himself he dare not, so he said lightly that he hoped Margaret would not enjoy the ball over much without him, for absolutely he could not go. His selfishness pleased Margaret, though she did not retort that, notwithstanding his absence, she should be as happy as ever she could, and before he left her for the second time that day they were on terms of perfect agreement. He could travel to Manselands out of reach of pain in company with an easy conscience, and Margaret could anticipate her party, if not with such intense pleasure, at least without self-reproach.

But when Bell Rowley heard of Colonel Fielding's secession she declared that there was no faith in man, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux, who knew what cause to assign for it, was more gravely troubled. She probed Margaret to discover if she had any suspicion of the reason, but Margaret told her frankly, "He said that he must absolutely leave for a few days to go to Manselands, and I did not wish to know why."

Mrs. Joan reflected that it was perhaps as well that he should get out of the way; but she thought at the same time, that it was wrong in him to marry a dear girl like her Gipsy while the mere name of another woman moved him so powerfully.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BELL ROWLEY'S BALL.

"WHY was Bell Rowley going to have a coming-of-age party as if she were a son and heir? was there not young Tom?" Mirkdale had asked, derisively, when the affair was first promulgated; but, nevertheless, everybody with one consent thankfully accepted her invitation, whether for the select dinner or for the miscellaneous gathering afterwards.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Margaret Holt were amongst the number of those invited to dine and stay the night; and as they reached Bransby early, by desire, Bell would go up with them to their room to expatiate on the completeness and success of

all her arrangements. But chiefly she went to see Margaret's dress, because she had heard through her own maid and Jaques what an elegant and expensive one it was, and ever since she had been haunted with the fear that it might eclipse her own. When Jaques had spread it forth upon the bed for her inspection, she exclaimed in astonishment at its richness and beauty, but said that for herself she preferred rather more colour, and so she was going to wear a full rose satin. Catching a glimpse of the pearl ornaments, she asked where they came from, and as Margaret looked embarrassed, she said, "Ah! she could guess, they were a present from *somebody*! and had not *somebody* behaved very badly in running away to Scotland just then?"

Margaret tried to feel indifferent, and to look so, but she writhed under Bell's impertinent raillery, and was excessively glad when the arrival of a heavy travelling carriage, which seemed to have come from a distance, obliged her to descend and welcome a second party of guests.

It was a pleasant room with a good look-out over the park that had been assigned to Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Margaret; and while Jaques was unpacking they sat by the window, and through the gathering dimness of the October twilight watched the driving up to the door of carriage after carriage, all which disgorged two or three, and in some instances, four or five visitors. Out of one was lifted a lame paralytic gentleman, on seeing whom Mrs. Joan exclaimed, "There is poor Mr. Grant Hamilton—how wretchedly ill he looks!" Margaret expressed surprise that he should leave home in his condition for such an occasion, and was told that he had always been fond of society and that now he seemed more so than ever; perhaps he tried to get away from the contemplation of his own miseries, Mrs. Joan said. And was that lady who had got out of the carriage after him his wife? Margaret asked. Yes, she was his wife. Then Margaret wanted to know why she had married him—was he always like that. Mrs. Joan told her, No; he was always a singular man and a man in bad health, but his paralytic seizure was recent, and his wife was very devoted to him in his helplessness.

There was a busy noise in the house of servants going from place to place, carrying luggage to the owners' rooms, and advancing the preparations in the ball-room. Before the dressing-bell rang Fanny Rowley came and fetched Margaret

to look at the decorations, which were really pretty and in good taste; there were only one or two scattered lights in the room, but sufficient to show how good the effect would be when it was all illuminated. The temporary orchestra was raised in a recess formed by a deep embayed window draped with crimson; there were abundant festoons of evergreens and flower-pots bedded in moss on brackets against the wainscot, and wax candles innumerable in the chandelier pendant from the ceiling; the seats also were covered with crimson, and the polished oak floor was chalked in the most orthodox designs. Fanny could scarcely stay her feet from capering over it there and then, but the entrance of the musicians, who had just arrived and come to place their instruments in the orchestra, was a signal for Margaret and her to retire. Margaret went back up stairs to Mrs. Joan quite pleased with what she had seen. "Oh! if Colonel Fielding had only been here, how I should have enjoyed it!" thought she with a sigh; but the stir and novelty were an agreeable excitement to her which even his absence could not take away.

Jaques now announced her preparations made to dress Margaret for her first ball; and Mrs. Joan, who had in her absence put on her own black velvet and point lace, sat by to direct and superintend the process. She was desirous that her young favourite should look her loveliest that night, not for her own sake only, but because reports of her appearance, style, and manner, were certain to travel to Manselands, and she was aware that in that quarter there prevailed an unjust and unworthy impression against her. Though so wholly unaccustomed to general society, Margaret had not any awkward nervousness to overcome; she was shy, indeed, but her shyness took the disguise of a quietly proud demeanour which sat upon her well; and though she was always still and silent among strangers, the brilliant intelligence of her countenance showed that her reserve was that of girlish modesty and not of dulness. Jaques put forth all her taste and skill in attiring her—first in tressing up her luxuriant hair more in accordance with the then fashion, and afterwards in arranging the delicate broad folds of the white dress which Margaret's height and grace of shape showed to the best advantage. But where liberal nature had done so much, art could do but little, and very soon the waiting woman desisted from her labours, exclaiming with genuine fervour of admiration, "She looks

beautiful any way and every way; it's a real pride and pleasure to behold her."

Mrs. Joan thought so too, but Margaret did not feel to care much for their praises, because the only eyes in which she would have delighted to shine were not there to commend her.

They were rather late in descending to the drawing-room, and when they entered they found a large party already assembled. Mrs. Joan Clervaux was personally known to most of those present, but Margaret was a perfect stranger, and a low whisper of admiration and inquiry greeted her appearance. "What a glorious young creature, who is she?" "What a lovely girl," "A goddess, by Jove," were some of the remarks, and Bell Rowley had to do a round of explanation, for those who came from beyond Mirkdale had never heard of Sylvan Holt or his daughter; Bell ever after alluded to Margaret as "a girl whom the men admired," meaning thereby to depreciate her beauty as only winning the suffrages of the inferior sex of judges. Margaret was unconscious of exciting any unusual remark, and dropping quietly into the low chair which Fanny Rowley had risen to offer her, drew a little steady composure from a few minutes' serious contemplation of her bouquet, and then let her eyes wander over the various groups scattered about the handsome apartment.

And first she noticed in his wheeled chair near the fire the crippled gentleman whom she had seen carried in from his carriage. He was a pallid, scared looking man with a large, prominent brow, and a thin sprinkling of grey hair on the back and sides of his head. Sir Thomas Rowley was listening deferentially to his laboured and difficult attempts to describe some changes that he had been making on his Derbyshire property. Close beside him sat his wife—a fair satin-skinned woman, blonde, lovely, with plaintive eyes (Heaven knows what tears ineffectual had done to dim them), soft brown hair, abundant, waving over a brow that ought to have been calm but which had a troubled shadow upon it, a close-folded mouth, very loveable, very tender, and an expression of extreme sweetness and candour. She spoke but little, and when she did speak, it was in a low voice, such as every one felt must accompany those eyes; sometimes she prompted her husband or explained what he wished to convey, and not seldom, he, with querulous annoyance, insisted on repeating the words over again in his painful stammering fashion.

These two were Frances Stanley and her husband—Colonel Fielding's Frances Stanley.

Setting aside poor Mr. Hamilton, Bell Rowley had collected together some very pleasant people for her dinner-party. There was Captain Crawford, who had nothing besides his pay, and had not distinguished himself in his profession at all, and who therefore made it the business of life to be usefully agreeable; to dance and flirt well, to talk brilliantly or be silent judiciously, as the occasion prompted. There was Wilfred Deane, a man whose origin nobody knew, who had travelled all the world over, slaughtering lions, tigers, elephants, bears, and other such small deer, and who had lately settled down in Mirkdale with a pretty wife, young enough to be his daughter, who seemed to love him for the same cause as Desdemona loved Othello, "for the perils he had passed." Besides these there were the three Johnstones—Sir Edward and his two sons. Sir Edward was an old navy man, and both his boys he had bred to the sea; handsome boys they were, much more liberally endowed by nature than by fortune, and favourites wherever they appeared. And to match them there were the two accomplished Miss Ogilvies and their widowed mother—Mrs. General Ogilvie as she styled herself.

Then as makeweights or foils to all these agreeable people, there were the Standish family—father, mother, and only son. Mrs. Standish was a large imposing woman who dressed very magnificently, and Mr. Standish was a little insignificant man to look at, who spoke often in Parliament though never to any purpose, and was in the habit of regarding himself as one of the main props of the constitutional government of his country. Their son Simon was a smaller and feebler copy of his father in person, while morally he was imbued with his mother's heavy pomposity; a more utterly foolish and vacant young man did not exist, yet as heir to Rookwood Manor and other considerable estates in the northern part of the county, he was taught to consider himself a very influential and important personage; so, at least, it appeared from the deference paid to him by the two Ogilvie girls and Bell Rowley, who had decoyed him to a table littered with prints, and were extolling him most lavishly and injudiciously on his talent for caricature; already he was top-heavy with the weight of his own greatness, and a very little more self-conceit would make him absolutely intolerable even to his adulators.

The party sat down one-and-twenty to dinner. It was Margaret's good fortune to be taken in by the younger of the Johnstone sons, a frank-hearted merry lad, who, it turned out, had been at the same school as Martin Carew before they had chosen their professions; so they had a ready-made theme for conversation, and Margaret found the stately ceremonial of a great dinner much less tedious and wearisome than she had anticipated; in fact, she liked the glitter and hum, and general air of luxurious enjoyment exceedingly. But it was not the dinner that was to be the grand affair of the night, and most of the young people were naturally anxious to get it over and begin dancing. It was nine o'clock, however, before they escaped from the dining-room, and Lady Rowley and her daughters had not a moment's repose to cool their heated faces before the people invited for the ball began to arrive. Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Margaret retired quietly up-stairs, and sat by their bed-room fire for half an hour; Mrs. Joan would gladly have stayed longer, and have taken a comfortable refreshing nap, but Margaret was eager not to lose any part of the—to her—novel scene, and coaxed her out of her sleepiness back to the drawing-room. Young Harry Johnstone was lying in wait at the stairs-foot to engage Margaret for the first dance, and received her assurance that she could not dance with perfect incredulity.

"Oh! you are making fun," persisted he; "you are not a Quaker, are you?"

Margaret laughed, and said, No, she was not a Quaker, but she had never learnt to dance; whereupon Harry Johnstone declared that he considered a girl in a very dangerous way who had been so neglected, and volunteered to teach her himself, but Margaret declined to make an exhibition of her awkwardness, and retired with Mrs. Joan to a quiet corner near the orchestra from which she could see everything without being much seen herself, and the disappointed young sailor went off and consoled himself with Fanny Rowley instead.

It was a pretty sight, almost a bit of fairy-land, Margaret thought at first, but presently the room filled so that it was not easy to obtain a view of the whole line of dancers. There were amongst the guests some persons of distinguished appearance, and many of rank and wealth, but there were also others of whom Bell Rowley whispered that you had better not ask who they were, for though they dressed well and looked well, they were just nobody at all. Margaret saw Mr. Paley with

his chin in the air, and little parson Wilmot dancing as briskly as anybody; then she recognised in a laughing lady dressed all in bridal white that Bertha Leven who was of the party to Deepgyll, and who had since been married to Mr. Barlow. She, perhaps, regretted a little having to sit so still while all the other young people were dancing and gay, and she certainly regretted a good deal the absence of Colonel Fielding; many gentlemen were introduced to her as partners, who had to be refused, and Bell Rowley at last came and made lament over her, saying she was sure that *somebody* had *forbidden* her to dance. Margaret denied this charge with energy, which only made Bell assert the fact or falsehood all the more positively; and she communicated to several persons who, struck by Margaret's beauty, asked for an introduction, that she was engaged to Colonel Fielding, who, not being able to come to the ball himself, had ordered her not to dance. This prompted many to entreat her to infringe the supposed tyrannical command until she was tired of reiterating, "I don't dance," and more emphatically on being pressed, "I *cannot* dance." She was left in peace at last, and for half an hour before supper she had an uninterrupted opportunity for watching the gay scene of movement, and of listening to the really inspiring and lively music. Mrs. Joan showed an exemplary patience in sitting by her, and answering her manifold questions as to who this was and who that was, and giving her opinion on the personal peculiarities of those who were more conspicuous than the general throng.

"I think," said Margaret, "that Mrs. Grant Hamilton is the most beautiful woman in the room—don't you, Mrs. Joan?"

Mrs. Joan thought her very lovely still. "But I remember her as a girl, and then she certainly was an exquisite creature," added she; "and she was as good as she is beautiful."

Mrs. Grant Hamilton was standing not far from them at the time they were speaking of her. She was apparently searching in the crowd for some one whom she could not discover, for after a few minutes she came to Mrs. Joan and said in a low, eager tone,—

"Lady Rowley tells me that the girl who is to be Rupert Fielding's wife is here: can you point her out to me, Mrs. Joan?"

Margaret overheard the question, and a rosy blush dyed her face; she was seated beyond her old friend, leaning back, and almost hidden by the sweep of the window drapery, so that

Mrs. Hamilton did not see her until she had spoken, and then the confused, flickering eyes that met hers with a half smile in them answered her inquiry. Her own pallid cheek flushed for a moment, and with a gracious inclination of her head she apologized for her inquisitiveness, adding by way of explanation that Rupert Fielding was a very old friend of hers, and she was interested in whatever concerned him. She looked long and earnestly in Margaret's face, as if she sought to read her character therein, and then passing round to a seat in the recess beside her, she said—

"You will let me know you a little, my dear, will you not?"

Margaret was charmed by the persuasive softness of her voice and manner, and though she blushed under the close scrutiny to which she was subjected, she replied with her quiet "Yes," and made room for Mrs. Hamilton on the couch beside her. Mrs. Joan Clervaux took the opportunity of her young friend's having gained another companion to make a tour amongst the dowagers in the drawing-room, for though she would much rather this meeting had never taken place, since it *had* taken place, she thought it would develop more safely in her absence than her presence, and with less risk of dangerous allusions to old times. When she was gone Mrs. Hamilton, still with her soft searching eyes on Margaret's face, began to say, "I saw you before dinner, and some one said you were the daughter of Sylvan Holt of Wildwood, but I want to know your Christian name—I have a theory of favorite names—Will you tell what is yours?"

"They call me Margaret."

"Margaret," repeated Mrs. Hamilton, in a lingering voice; "and does Rupert Fielding call you Margaret or has he a pet name for you?"

"He always calls me Margaret, too." There was an expression indescribably touching in Mrs. Hamilton's eyes; Margaret could not understand the painful, aching sensation it gave her; she thought if she had looked at them long the tears would have risen to her own, and felt intuitively that this woman, so gentle, so beautiful, so charming, had suffered profoundly.

"And what name do you give him?" Mrs. Hamilton asked.

Margaret seemed rather startled by this question, and hesitated before answering it; and it was in a rather subdued and blushing way that she replied at last, "I never call him anything but Colonel Fielding."

Mrs. Hamilton sighed very softly : she was thinking what equality could there be between this beautiful child and her noble Rupert, and perhaps the thought, though she would never have allowed it even to herself, was not without a soothing satisfaction to her.

The ball-room was thinning now, and some one said, supper was going on in the dining-room, but Margaret and Mrs. Hamilton stayed some little time longer undisturbed, till Harry Johnstone came and asked Margaret if supper were tabooed as well as dancing, and led her away, while Sir Everard offered his arm to Mrs. Hamilton. They were separated by nearly the whole length of the table, but being seated at opposite sides their eyes often met. Frances Stanley's old power of fascination was not gone, for Margaret was subdued to her gentle influence already, and was only impatient for supper to be ended that she might rejoin her. But when Harry Johnstone took her back to her post of observation by the orchestra, though she had seen Mrs. Hamilton leave the table before her, she could now discover her nowhere ; she asked Fanny Rowley if she knew where she was, and Fanny, having made diligent inquiry, returned and told her that, as Mr. Hamilton also was gone from the drawing-room, she supposed they had retired. Margaret was disappointed, and when Mrs. Joan presently found her out, and said with a disguised yawn that Bell Rowley intended to keep up the dancing until daylight, she proposed that they should leave the ball-room, as many of the guests were already doing, and go to bed. Mrs. Joan was only too glad to accede, so they made their escape quietly up-stairs.

To reach their room they had to pass down a long corridor, at the end of which was a window uncurtained and deeply sunk in the wall. There was a beautiful moonlight shining through, and Mrs. Hamilton was sitting there just as she had left the supper table. Mrs. Joan wished her good-night, and proceeded to her apartment, but Margaret lingered behind, on the plea of admiring the silent wildness of the night landscape without. The ground was much broken thereabouts, and heavy masses of shadow lay along under clumps of forest trees, and the mysterious borders of a distant plantation.

"If you are up early to-morrow, let us have a walk together through that wood," said Mrs. Hamilton ; "it is many years since I have been there, but it used to be the loveliest spot. Will you go ?" Margaret promised she would, and suffered Mrs.

Hamilton to put her arm round her and draw her down upon the window-seat beside her. "My love, you are taller than I am, tell me how old you are," said she, passing one of her white caressing hands over Margaret's hair.

"I was seventeen last May."

"Seventeen! What pretty pearls these are. I always liked pearls better than any other ornaments;" and the soft fingers went wandering from necklace to eardrop, and from eardrop to brooch, and from brooch to bracelet, with a lingering sense of pleasure in touching what Rupert Fielding loved.

"He gave them to me," said Margaret, with a shy pride.

"Did he? I thought they were like his choice. But why is he gone into Scotland just now? Bell Rowley said I should meet him here; we have never met since his return from India."

"And you knew him before? I will tell him how disappointed you were; I thought he was coming too, until a few days back, when something obliged him to go immediately to Manselands—I don't know what."

The slight fingers playing with Margaret's hair quivered.

"Perhaps, love, you had better not say anything about my being disappointed—he has most likely forgotten me; we were young then, you know."

Margaret's mind was too unsuspicious to see the reality of that old long ago spoken of with such regretful tenderness.

"You were like Martin Carew and me. If Martin were my brother I could not be fonder of him than I am," said she. "But I don't think after so many years he would miss a chance of seeing me; I know I should be cut to the heart if he did."

Perhaps Mrs. Hamilton was cut to the heart too.

"I like to see that vehemence in you, Margaret," said she. "Do you mind my telling you that I thought you rather cold at first?"

Margaret coloured.

"Did you think me cold?" said she. "Oh, I hope I am not I know I do not *feel* cold to those I love."

"But you are afraid, perhaps, of showing how strongly and deeply you feel! You are very shy and proud, are you not; or am I mistaken? I will tell you why I think so; because, though you are so soon to marry Colonel Fielding, you say you do not call him by his name."

"He never bade me do so," replied Margaret.

"Let me hear how it sounds from your lips—say it—'Rupert'"

—and unconsciously in prompting Margaret she gave to the name a tenderness of tone, no doubt once familiar in his ears; but Margaret would not repeat it; she laughed and blushed, and said, No; he must give her leave first. She had never made a confidante of any one before, but Mrs. Hamilton hovered about the theme until she had elicited some of her inmost thoughts: the time favoured such talk, and Margaret scarcely knew how far she had gone in her confession until her companion said, "Tell me all, child; I like to hear your fond enthusiasm, and to see how happy you are." Then she stopped short, and when urged to speak on, she replied with sudden reserve, "I would rather not talk about myself any more. It is so silly."

Mrs. Hamilton had taken one of Margaret's hands in hers, as she listened to the details of past scenes and words so trivial and unmeaning except to those who love, but now with a gentle pressure she laid it down, and said—

"You are right, child; such feelings are too sacred for the intrusion of idle curiosity. But mine was no idle curiosity, believe me, but a very sincere interest in you as Rupert Fielding's future wife. I cannot tell you how glad, how very glad, I am that I have seen you—seen that you are worthy of his love."

Margaret said, "Oh no: she could not be that—look how ignorant she was—how different from other girls?"

"Rupert Fielding has chosen well—well and wisely," replied Mrs. Hamilton, in a tone of suppressed feeling. "Oh, child, what men love in us is not our skill in this or that accomplishment, or our cleverness, or even our beauty; it is something deeper and better than any of these—I cannot tell you what—they love because they love; because their fate and the woman of all women, their other half, is come."

Margaret never theorized, and now she heard Mrs. Hamilton speaking with but a vague comprehension of what she said. Response in the same strain she could make none.

"I have no merit towards him unless it be that I *do* love him," was all she said, but it was with an intensity that made Mrs. Hamilton thrill, it recalled so forcibly what she had once felt herself, what once she might as frankly and as innocently have acknowledged. They were both silent for a little, the sounds of the merry dance music in the ball-room filling up the pause, then Mrs. Hamilton whispered—

"There is some one coming up-stairs, dear; you had better leave me now, but remember our walk in the morning. May I kiss you?" and as Margaret bent towards her, she pressed her lips to her brow, then they said good-night and separated.

Margaret found Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Jaques sleepily awaiting her arrival, but Mrs. Joan had to keep up for full half an hour longer to listen to her favourite's praises of Mrs. Hamilton.

"She is captivating," Margaret said, with girlish enthusiasm; "Oh, if I were a man she is exactly the woman I should love! Did you know, Mrs. Joan, that she was once great friends with Colonel Fielding, and she expected to see him here to-night? I wish he had stayed, she would have been so glad."

"Did she tell you so, Gipsy, or did you only fancy it? Colonel Fielding is not to everybody so great a hero as he is to you."

"She talked of no one else, and seemed very disappointed. She had not seen him since he went out to India—and how long is that ago?"

"Ten years or more. But never mind poor Mrs. Hamilton now; let Jaques undress you, and tell me how you liked the ball."

"I liked it extremely! It would have been perfection, but for——" Margaret was going to say, "but for Colonel Fielding's absence," only she stopped short because Jaques was there. Mrs. Joan finished the sentence for her, and then asked what part of the evening she had enjoyed the most.

"The half-hour I spent with Mrs. Hamilton in the corridor window," was the ready answer.

"Poor Frances! she was always a sweet and lovable creature," said Mrs. Joan, "no one can help pitying her sad fate. Her husband was never worthy of her, never! and since he has become such a wreck his temper is insufferable. Who could have predicted such a fate for her who knew her in her girlhood? the happiest, gayest, kindest heart! She carried sunshine with her wherever she went: I scarcely knew her face again to-night, for though it must always be beautiful it is so changed from what it was."

Margaret absolutely shuddered. The remembrance of Mrs. Hamilton's painful position had not been present before her when they were together, and now it came upon her with all the force of a sudden shock. She dropped her arms which

had been raised to disentangle the pearls from her hair, exclaiming—

“How sad! it is enough to make one weep for her! How can she support such a burden? I think I should go mad under it; but she is kind to him—perhaps she loved him once, Mrs. Joan. But it seems as if she ought to have been the wife of a man as great and as good as Colonel Fielding—ought she not?”

Mrs. Joan felt very uncomfortable.

“There are not many Colonel Fieldings in the world,” she replied, “and the only one we know has fallen to the lot of a young maiden who deserves to be as happy as he can make her. Now I have finished talking for to-night, and if you have any more gossip you must reserve it for our early tea at home to-morrow, Gipsy.”

“Only tell me at what time we shall leave in the morning, and I promise not to say another word.”

“After luncheon—between two and three o’clock.”

“Then we shall have time enough for our walk,” thought Margaret, and, at last, she committed herself to the hands of the weary but patient Jaques.

It was after two o’clock then, but Margaret felt for a long while as if sleep were chased from her eyes, so powerfully had the novel excitement of the evening acted on her unaccustomed spirits. She sat the fire out before she got into bed, and even then, instead of closing her eyes, she lay thinking over all she had seen and heard, then of Colonel Fielding and of Mrs. Hamilton, and of the thousand floating fancies that drift through a wakeful brain. For nearly three hours longer the music and dancing went on below, and the grey dawn was peeping over the eastern ridge of Litton Fell when the last light was extinguished in the ball-room, the last carriage rolled echoing away from the door, and Bell Rowley’s birthday party came to an end as all things mundane must.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WOOD WALK.

THE reason why Mrs. Hamilton was so fond of Bransby wood was, that there she and Rupert Fielding had taken their walks together many a time in the pleasant season of their love, when there seemed a possibility that it might have a happy issue, and also in those few dreary days that had preceded their final separation. It was a strange feeling that made her wish to explore it again for the first time since then with Margaret Holt, —her successor in the affections of the only man she had ever really loved. The dew was heavy on the long reedy grass and amongst the beds of fallen leaves when they struck deep into its glades early that October morning after the ball; on the trees the foliage was becoming scant, so that the prospect lay open for a considerable distance on all sides, and the air was quite autumnal, damp, chill, and loaded with the breath of vegetable decay. Margaret, being without any sentimental reminiscences of either time or place, found the sunless glades unattractive, and rather marvelled why her companion kept on and on while every bough dripped upon them and their shoes were soaked through. There was the sound of a rushing water some distance to the right, but not visible from the path where they were walking, and when they got through the wood, and could see the open country on the other side, Mrs. Hamilton said, "Run down the bank, dear, and look at the beck, there is a pretty little fall below: it will not take you five minutes to go and return, and you will find me here when you come back."

Margaret descended the slope towards the water, and as she disappeared Mrs. Hamilton went in amongst the trees for a few paces on the other hand, until she came to a gnarled elm that stood a little apart from the rest, and was carpeted underneath with soft moss where the dead leaves did not encumber the ground. On the further side of this elm, eleven years ago, had Rupert Fielding cut his name and her own; she expected to find them still as they were then—darkened a little and the wounded edges of the bark healed, perhaps—but, instead, she found that some recent knife had tried to score them out, and

so effectually, that only she, whose eyes were quickened by memory and affection, could have discerned where there had ever been a letter at all. She leant against the tree for a moment or two, quite sick and faint with the revulsion of feeling, and thinking that only he could have done this, and then returned to the open path just in time to meet Margaret coming up the bank again. The girl was quite shocked by the startling pallor that had come over her countenance, and exclaimed that they must go back to the house immediately; she was sure she had overtired herself by walking so far. Mrs. Hamilton denied being fatigued, but Margaret would not be satisfied until their faces were set towards the house—though they loitered a long while on the way. The luncheon bell rang as they crossed a rustic bridge that connected the park and flower-gardens, and on hearing it, Margaret mentioned when she and Mrs. Joan were to leave.

“So soon! Oh; I hope to keep you a little longer with me! Who knows whether we may ever meet again?” said Mrs. Hamilton, and she proposed that, instead of hurrying indoors, they should rest for a short time upon a seat that stood there almost close to the water’s edge. Behind it was a screen of yews which hid it from the house, and a beautiful prospect spread in front when the weather was clear and the sun shone, but now, though no rain fell, it looked washed and grey through the mists that gradually thickened as the day advanced. Margaret found it raw and chill, and was reluctant that Mrs. Hamilton should remain there, but she said it was not the damp that affected her, and she should really prefer to stay if her companion would.

“I like you, Margaret, and yet I was not prepared to like you—you have won me in spite of myself,” said she, suddenly.

Margaret’s colour rose; “Why in spite of yourself?” asked she—her own imagination suggesting no other possible reason than her poor mother’s history. “Why were you set against me?—tell me.”

Mrs. Hamilton had flushed too, but it was at her own indiscretion.

“Nay, child, I cannot answer you there, for I am an enigma to myself,” she replied. “When I first heard that Rupert Fielding was going to marry I longed to see and judge of his choice. Well, I have seen, and am satisfied. You will be

very happy together, for I know he will love you—and you *must* love him, you *must* be proud of him; any woman must who had a grain of excellence in her. But I wish I might have seen him here with you last night.”

“I shall tell him you said so, and I hope he will be angry with himself for disappointing us both,” Margaret said.

“No, dearest, no! don’t do that. If you tell him anything, only tell him that you saw me, and that I was looking well and strong—and, if you like, you may say that I wished you both from my heart every happiness that Heaven can bestow.” Such a wan weary look came over her beautiful face as she spoke: it was fortunate that Margaret was watching the water, and not her, or else there must have entered into her mind some suspicion of the truth. After a few minutes’ longer rest, passed by both in silence, Mrs. Hamilton proposed that they should go to luncheon, lest some one should be sent in search of them.

When they entered the dining-room they found assembled a considerable party besides those staying in the house, whom Bell Rowley had invited the night before to come over, and have a game at croquet. Young Harry Johnstone was there among the rest, and he insisted on claiming Margaret as his partner in the first round that was to be played after luncheon. She consented reluctantly, knowing how short the interval would be before Mrs. Joan Clervaux would wish to leave, but he was so urgent and quizzical that she gave in, hoping that there would still be an opportunity for seeing Mrs. Hamilton again. But here she was disappointed, for the carriage had been ordered earlier than she expected, and Mrs. Joan was already seated and waiting while she had her mallet in her hand. She gave it up immediately to Fanny who was standing out, and then ran in-doors to make her adieux to Lady Rowley: she next sought Mrs. Hamilton in the library, where her husband was, and up-stairs, but she could not find her anywhere, and meeting Jaques, who had been sent to summon her a second time, she was obliged to go and get into the carriage without any leave-taking at all. But when she was seated, and was casting disappointed glances up at the window of the room that Mrs. Hamilton occupied, she appeared at it for a moment. Margaret would have sprung out and rushed back, but she waved her hand in sign of denial, and, as the horses began to move, she drew down the sash and retired.

"Poor Mrs. Hamilton appears very delicate; she does not look like a woman who is long for this world," said Mrs. Joan sadly.

Margaret made no answer; she was leaning forward with her face against the glass and tears in her eyes. The recollection of the pale countenance bidding her a silent farewell from the up-stairs window haunted her all the way to Oakfield, and, at intervals, for long after; but when they were within a mile of home she began to recover herself, and asked Mrs. Joan to tell her something of Mrs. Hamilton's history, adding that she seemed to her a most melancholy and desolate person.

"Her history is only that of many another woman, Gipsy, I'm afraid," was the reply; "it is neither very strange nor very romantic. When she was quite young she formed an attachment to an individual of whom her parents disapproved because he was a younger son and poor: Frances Stanley could have borne such poverty very philosophically, but he, perhaps, feared it for her, and they separated, though still maintaining their engagement until brighter times; but these brighter times never came for them, because, when he had been gone about two years, heavy losses came upon her family, and after much persuasion—and probably considering it a sacred filial duty—she married Mr. Grant Hamilton, who has behaved very generously to her brothers. That is the outline of her history, Gipsy, you must fill it up as your fancy dictates. We can all see that enveloped in luxury she is a sad, sorrowful woman—so very sad, so very sorrowful that one cannot but think that death, when it comes to release her, will be more than welcome."

Margaret thought she could fill up that outline very distinctly—a grand mistake! What innocent youthful imagination could fill up the sum of torture endured by a keenly sensitive woman stretched on the rack of an uncongenial marriage, and bound, till death should them part, to a breathing querulous spectre of humanity for whom her highest sentiment was a shrinking pity? Margaret's fancy had no tints deep enough assuredly to colour the mournful story of Mrs. Hamilton's life, and yet she dwelt upon it with a singular, tenacious fascination, counting up its sorrows as if the contemplation of them were to serve hereafter as a fortifying lesson to herself.

The early separation from her lover—ah! what grief must

that have been! then the two years of lingering hopefulness, followed by what vain struggles, what tears, what frantic rebellings, to issue, at last, into this dire sacrifice.

"I would have died rather!" was Margaret's unchastened thought; "no duty can be greater than faithfulness to our own love—I would not dare go before God with a lie on my lips, promising what I could never do!"

There was the terrible example of her own mother—one who had offered herself up on the altar of worldly position, whence she had fallen into the lowest deep of sin and degradation. Frances Stanley, who had yielded herself to the urgency of family selfishness, and was paying her penalty in a life of slow torture such as Mrs. Joan declared to be no uncommon case in the world.

It was natural for Margaret to think, in her own innocent, self-confident pride, "I would do this, I would not do that," for she had yet to learn that below all our endeavours, our striving, our hopes, our fears, our loves, there is an under-current of circumstance that eddies us to and fro; sometimes placing us high on the happy shore where we would be, but just as often drifting us far, far from it, and throwing us, wrecked, broken, and helpless, upon one of the barren islands of life, where we may patiently wait Death's coming for our deliverance, because no fair bark of hope shall ever set sail for us again!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.

MRS. JOAN CLERVAUX had exacted a promise from her young favourite that after the night spent at Bransby, she would also spend a second with her, and as, when they reached Oakfield, there was not daylight enough for her to walk up to the Grange and return, a messenger was sent to invite Sylvan Holt to come and pass the evening with her there.

He presently arrived, bringing with him a letter for his daughter from Colonel Fielding—the first she had ever received. It was worth while to see her blushing joy as she got away

into a corner by herself to read it, and though her father and Mrs. Joan seemed quite inobservant, they both discerned how unfeignedly glad she was.

The Colonel wrote that he should return to Mirkdale in the beginning of the following week, and then he urged on Margaret a necessity that he said there existed for their marriage taking place very soon—next month, November, he suggested. Margaret paused over this passage in dismay, and when she and Mrs. Joan retired for the night, she read it aloud to her, adding that she had quite intended to stay there through the coming winter with her father, and that besides she did not like the idea of being married in November. Mrs. Joan wanted to know what objection she had to that month in particular.

"It is a gloomy month, and we should not have a sunshiny day," Margaret replied; "I will have a bright day for my wedding, if we wait until next summer for it, and I will not be married on a Friday."

"I have known bright days in November, Gipsy, and there are no more Fridays in it than any other month," said Mrs. Joan; "but as the day lies with you to fix, how do you propose to arrange for the weather?" Margaret said she did not know, and her old friend quizzically suggested that she should settle it as they did picnics in Mirkdale, the event to take place on the first fine morning after such a date; but in that case, Margaret was reminded that she must forego both company and grand breakfast.

"There will be no grand breakfast—how is it possible with only Jacky? And as for company, I do not know a face I should wish to see there except yours and Mrs. Sinclair's—unless, indeed, we could spirit Martin Carew over for the day," was Margaret's reply.

"How do you think Martin will take the news of your marriage, Gipsy?" asked Mrs. Joan, feeling a little aggrieved for her nephew.

"He will be glad—don't you think so?"

"He will be glad to know that you are happy, no doubt. But, Margaret, be reasonable for once," said her old friend with great gravity, "it is a very solemn undertaking for a young thing like you to be married, and it will not do to treat it as a casualty that you may put off from day to day for a moment's whim: Colonel Fielding is urgent, and might not like to be

told you would marry him some fine day. You must settle beforehand for one certain date, and whatever you settle on you must keep to."

Margaret made a little gesture of her head which implied that she intended to be perseveringly rebellious, and said—

"I am utterly determined that on none but a fine day will I be married. If it is settled beforehand ever so decidedly, and when I wake in the morning the rain is driving at my window, as it always does in November, no power on earth shall make me go to church. It is not lucky—Jacky has said so a thousand times."

"Jacky is a superstitious old goose, and you are no better, Gipsy. But if Colonel Fielding does not gainsay your caprice, I know no one who has a right to do so, unless it be your father: he will have no more peace until the affair is over."

"I still do not see why it should be hurried on so; I would much rather have had a longer time to think about it."

"There are some events best accomplished at once, and this is one of them, Margaret—so I honestly believe; I am no advocate for long engagements. But come, name some day in particular; it must be done.—I see the Colonel suggests the tenth, and your father, who has also heard from him, raises no objections—shall it be the tenth?"

"No, that is much too early—I should prefer the thirty-first—but not the thirty-first, either, unless it be fine weather."

"Gipsy, you are perverse; there are not thirty-one days in November!" said Mrs. Joan almost impatiently; "sit down and read the Colonel's letter again: it is hard if he cannot plead his own cause without the help of an old woman."

Margaret laughed mischievously, and said, she would put the letter under her pillow and dream on it, before she made up her mind to either one day or another. The issue of her nocturnal visitings was only a firmer resolve to keep to the "fine day," and none of Mrs. Joan's arguments or persuasions could draw her to any other conclusion. When Colonel Fielding was made aware of the uncertainty that hovered over his wedding-day, he was very naturally inclined to remonstrate; but one of Margaret's prejudices—bred in her from her babyhood, and fostered by many a grim legend—was up in arms against him, and all the promise he could extract from her was, that if the twenty-eighth of November proved fine they should be married on that day, but if not, on

the twenty-ninth ; should the weather be unfavourable on the twenty-ninth, then on the thirtieth, and if it rained on the thirtieth—the first of December falling on a Friday—she would go to the church on the Monday, rain or fair, and think there was a fate in it.

Of course, the marriage being thus uncertain, it must be strictly private ; the sunshine would carry their invitations to Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Mrs. Sinclair, and Mr. Wilmot was requested to hold himself in readiness for the auspicious moment ; nobody else was expected. There had been some conversation between Sylvan Holt and Colonel Fielding as to *where* the marriage should be celebrated : Mrs. Joan thought the heiress of Abbeymeads ought to be married from Abbeymeads, but her father demurred. He thought it would be ill to revive old feelings on such an occasion, and preferred that it should be quietly got over at Beckford Church. Colonel Fielding had always inclined to its celebration there, and he did so all the more on his return from the north, because his own people had declined being present, wherever it took place ; even his favourite sister, Cecy, was not permitted to return with him to act as Margaret's bridesmaid.

He did not make this coldness a ground of quarrel with his family, as he might have done. Their prejudice was not ill founded, and but a short time before he had shared it himself. His mother had spoken very openly on the occasion, as also had his sister Katherine. "It shall not be said that we have furthered the marriage, Rupert, for we dislike it extremely," the former declared ; "but when Margaret is your wife bring her to us and she shall be welcome for your sake, though not for her own."

Colonel Fielding was at first wounded and angry, but when a cooler moment brought reflection to his aid he acknowledged that it would not be well to let this one cold blast chill the warm fires of family affection ; he therefore took his mother at her word, and said he should bring his bride straight to Manselands to make the acquaintance of his father's house. He wisely refrained from complicating matters by letting Margaret know the strong feeling that prevailed against her there, believing that her frank gaiety and true warmth of heart would soon vanquish all coldness and distrust. Sylvan Holt was left equally in the dark—if he had had a suspicion that his darling was unwelcome to the family into which she was

about to enter, he would have utterly repudiated the marriage, and have let her die rather than expose her to slight and contumely.

Margaret was delighted at the idea of going to Manselands after her marriage; she made Colonel Fielding describe and redescribe his people, one and all: Katie, who was a widow; Amy, whose marriage was soon to follow her own; and the winning wilful Cecy, who was so like herself. Then the Laird had his turn, and then Mrs. Fielding, and Geraldine, the beautiful Lady Stewart, who lived in London. "I shall love them all so dearly! do you think they will love me?" said Margaret.

The Colonel did not see how any one could help it—he was sure they would love her when they knew her. This conversation took place during the first visit he paid her after his return from Manselands, and when it was exhausted Margaret began to speak of Bell Rowley's birthday ball.

"How did you enjoy it?" asked the Colonel.

"Very much indeed, though I never danced once—you know I cannot dance, don't you?"

"I never heard you say so before—then what did you do?"

"I sat and looked on, and talked to somebody: to somebody who knew you before you went out to India, and who was quite sorry and disappointed you were not there. Can you guess who it was?"

Colonel Fielding twirled his moustache, walked the length of the room, came back and asked—

"Was it Mrs. Grant Hamilton?"

"Yes, it was—how did you know that?" Bell Rowley, he said, had told him. "Then you should have gone to meet her and please me, instead of running away to Manselands. She bade me tell you that she was looking strong and well, but she was not; and Mrs. Joan said she thought she could not live long. Oh, if you had seen her face at the window when we came away!" Margaret ran on while the Colonel fretted his moustache and stared out into space, where he saw nothing but a mist wavering before his vision—"If you had seen her face you could never have forgotten it—I think the angels, if they are ever sad, must look like her: she is quite the loveliest, quite the sweetest woman I ever saw; and Mrs. Joan says that when she was a girl she was lovelier still!"

"And did she send any other message, Margaret?" the Colonel asked.

"Yes; she said I might tell you, if I liked, that she wished us both from her heart every happiness that Heaven could bestow."

Again Colonel Fielding marched the length of the room, and came back to Margaret's feet: "Oh! you women are so impatient of fate!" said he bitterly. Margaret looked up at him in astonishment, and asked what he meant. "I was thinking of Frances Stanley, of Mrs. Hamilton. She had the possibility of a better life before her, but she could not wait—she must needs see to the end of her days at once, and tie herself to that insensate log. Poor soul! it ought not to be I to reproach her, though."

"Did you know the person to whom she was attached, Colonel Fielding? Was she very fond of him?" Margaret asked.

The Colonel was confused, he hesitated, blundered, said he supposed she was at the time—in fact, he knew she was, and then tried to get away from the dangerous theme; but Margaret found that she had struck a chord that moved him out of his ordinary stately calm, and it pleased her to play on it a little longer. She repeated her question pointedly, as to whether he had known Frances Stanley's lover. Yes, he said, he had known him intimately, they had been schoolfellows and brother officers—and then he stopped suddenly short. He was disinclined to employ even the shadow of subterfuge with this innocent young mind, but he was also equally disinclined to allow the truth to become known; but Margaret, of whom he had already had experience as an apt catechiser, baffled his efforts to escape from the subject by putting the most direct questions.

"If you knew him intimately, tell me what he was like; was he quite worthy of her?" she asked.

"Why, Margaret, when are we worthy of you?" the Colonel rejoined: "a pure good woman is something saintly; do you think we are ever as innocent and holy as you?" If he thought by this pretty compliment to turn her away from the theme of her interest he was mistaken: she still persisted in wanting to hear what *he* was like; was he handsome? was he clever? was he brave? was he kind? Thus pressed, the Colonel said there must have been *some* good in him or a woman

like Frances Stanley could never have set her affections on him.

"But you do not seem quite to have approved of him—I don't like him for having ever given her up: she would have been far happier as his wife, had they been poor, than as what she is. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes!" replied the Colonel with suppressed vehemence; "that was the error, the crime in his life which ought never to be forgiven him. He might have married her and he did not, because he dreaded exposing her to a poverty from which she herself did not shrink, and so he left her exposed to a fate more miserable than he would have visited on an enemy."

"He did wrong; I think it was almost cowardly of him," Margaret said: "I wonder what he must feel if he sees her now."

Colonel Fielding twirled his moustache rapidly, but made no response to this speculation, and it was just on Margaret's lips to ask, "What was his name?" when the door opened and Sylvan Holt came in. The subject was, of course, dropped for that time, and not revived between them until many months later, on an occasion hereafter to be mentioned.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BEFORE THE WEDDING.

ABOUT this time Mr. Meddowes paid his second visit to Wildwood Grange: but prior to his arrival Jacky had taken care to have a guest-chamber decently furnished, so that the lawyer had no more aching bones to act upon his temper, and made himself as acceptable to Margaret as he was to her father. On the part of Colonel Fielding there came over from Edinburgh a withered Scotchman, Mr. McCann, and after his arrival there was much sitting in council in the summer parlour, much drawing up of instructions, and a world of talk, all of which related to the making of Margaret's marriage settlements. The feminine department was resigned to the experience of Mrs.

Joan Clervaux, who, indeed, made a show of consulting her young favourite, but in reality left it to the discretion of a celebrated London milliner to provide all that was rich and rare, tasteful and costly, for this beautiful and wealthy bride, who must carry amongst her husband's kindred nothing but what befitted the heiress of Abbeymeads and Rushfall, let her past belongings have been ever so simple and modest. This was Mrs. Joan's desire and resolve: she was angry at the spirit which prevailed against Margaret at Manselands, and did her best endeavours to ensure her lacking nothing which might enhance her value, or command respect in the Fielding family; and Mrs. Joan had lived long enough to learn how much consideration attaches to external show. "They shall have no cause to be ashamed of my pet," the old lady said to herself a little spitefully; "if they expect a clumsy, pretty-faced hoyden they will be quite mistaken, for when Gipsy chooses it, she can look as fine a lady—and a far lovelier one—than any of them." She did not communicate this sentiment to Gipsy herself, however, but only said, "It will be very different when you leave us, very different, darling; you must say good-bye to the brown carmelite and the straw hat when you say good-bye to the Grange."

There were magnificent jewels, heirlooms in the Holt family, which had been hidden from the light of the sun ever since Margaret's mother had fled, which Sylvan Holt forced himself to unbury, and sent to London to be reset for his daughter. For weeks they attracted to the shop where they were being wrought flocks of those curious in such matters, who spread abroad fabulous accounts of their splendour and value. Bell Rowley heard of them with spasms of envy and wonder, and descended to various little meannesses to obtain a view of them and the bride's clothes when they arrived from town. Margaret herself soon became embarrassed by the multitude and elegance of her new possessions, but yet she took an innocent delight in seeing herself bright and stately in shining satin, soft cobweb lace, and sparkling clusters of precious stones. Jacky seized every opportunity of "trying on," and admiring her "bonnie," until her "bonnie" began to ask in bewilderment when she was expected to wear all this accumulation of fine things, for there seemed to be a different dress for every hour in the day and every day in the week. Mrs. Joan Clervaux bade her give herself no anxiety on that account, for Jaques would

find her the various occasions. Jaques, be it observed, was going to resign her situation at Oakfield for the present, and to travel about with young Mrs. Fielding as her maid, until such time as she gained courage and experience enough to seek another abigail to replace her. It would be more comfortable for Margaret, all the women thought, that she should have one familiar face to turn to amongst so many strangers; for the Colonel himself was left out of their calculations altogether at this stage of the proceedings.

While the writing was going on in dingy lawyers' offices, and milliners' girls were stitching their fingers almost to the bone to accomplish in due time the stress of work brought upon them by the order from the north for bridal gear, Margaret Holt was taking her pleasure, and making the utmost of the few weeks of liberty and girlhood that were left to her. She rode fast and she rode far in those early winter days, with faithful Oscar stretching along in the rear, and her father or Colonel Fielding beside her. Sometimes she escaped with the staghound only, and went on her solitary explorations through Wildwood and over the moor, and there a thought would occasionally swoop down on her heart with all the pain of a regret for what she was giving up, and speak to her in an echo of Mrs. Joan's words, "It will be very different when you leave us; very different." Perhaps, also, a misgiving now and then overtook her, and suggested that it was cold and unfriendly in her new kindred never to have vouchsafed her a message of good wishes through their son and brother—Colonel Fielding had had none such to deliver. She wondered was it always so—and then tried to get rid of the doubt as something that reproached him for whom her love and trust were a passionate idolatry—but this faint misgiving was the only mote in Margaret's present sunshine, and she was far too proud to suffer any one to imagine she saw it but herself.

On the whole, the interval preceding the marriage passed quietly and pleasantly; no one was exuberantly happy, and no one either was or feigned to be unreasonably depressed; even Sylvan Holt, who had the most reason to repine, appeared to take each event as it arose quite as a matter of course; not that he *really* did so, but he had endeavoured to dull his anxieties by reflecting that his separation from his daughter was now become inevitable, and that it was useless and selfish to dim her happiness by obtruding his own trouble; but Mar-

garet knew very well what it was costing him to give her up.

Colonel Fielding's demeanour continued the same as it had always been—deferential, courteous, kind, and sometimes almost tenderly affectionate, and Margaret was just as loving, gentle, gay and capricious as her wont. He had no cause whatever to doubt how entirely he had won her, for she had no coldness and no reserve,—she adored him, and let him see it.

When the white wedding dress came—all richest satin and lace, with a wreath of orange blossoms, and a veil that would cover her from head to foot—she was a little impatient to try it on; but Jacky, though her own impatience was equally great, seriously forbade it.

"No, my bonnie, no! not till t' day comes, not till t' day comes!" cried she; "let me put all out o' sight;" and Margaret, knowing from her countenance that some unlucky penalty awaited her if she disobeyed, forbore from exerting her will for once. They both of them, Jacky, and the innocent child she had so thoroughly imbued with her superstitions that even yet she could not shake them off, did all that their mutual legendary wisdom had taught to avert misfortune from the marriage by scrupulously avoiding every ill-omened word, act and thought. Colonel Fielding often rallied Margaret on her credulity, perhaps in the hope of rallying her out of it, but without the smallest chance of success.

"Tell me," said she with a pretty defiant air, "tell me, have you no old stories up at Manselands? have you no faith in luck or ill-luck, as others have? Did you never hear of forewarning or dream that came true, or of a neglected omen that fulfilled itself? Don't laugh, but speak seriously."

"Seriously, then, Margaret, I never believed any such, whatever I may have heard, and of course, I have heard some wild tales—for instance, *they say*, that before any of our family dies, whether at home or abroad, warning is given by a white mouse coming out and playing on the hearth in the dining-hall. There is an addition to your store, dear little bundle of fancies!"

"Did you ever see the white mouse yourself?"

"No, I never did,—it is Elspie, our old nurse, who sees it when it comes. Why, Margaret, what wonder-wide eyes! You and Elspie, I foresee, are to be great cronies—she is not unlike Jacky, when Jacky puts on the dame."

"But about the white mouse—you will show me the room where it appears, won't you?"

"Oh, certainly!—I dare say we shall dine there in state on the day of our arrival at Manselands, and Elspie will show you its favourite hole."

Margaret made a pettish gesture at being laughed at, but one part of Colonel Fielding's reply rather alarmed her. "Dine in state," she echoed; "you don't mean there is to be any state made for me?"

"It is Manselands fashion to welcome a bride into the midst of a great gathering of kinsfolk: but I do not think you need fear its being formidable, for ours are chiefly plain, kindly bodies: you will be a proud young princess amongst them!"

"I shall have *you*, so I shall not care for the rest perhaps. Now, talk about Cecy, will you, and your mother—I feel to like them best." Colonel Fielding resumed the frequent subject which generally wound up all their interviews, and Margaret basked contentedly in the warmth of her own imagination, thinking pleasantly how she would love them, and how they should love her.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MARGARET'S MARRIAGE.

PERHAPS no one was so sanguine as to expect that the twenty-eighth of November would rise a fine day, but it did, nevertheless. Margaret had looked out at the sky the night before, when she went up to bed, and seeing no signs of storm for the morning, but only millions of stars, had felt undeniably surprised, and Colonel Fielding, on returning from the Grange where he had supped, to Holm Cottage for the last time, said to his servant buoyantly, "Have all in readiness for a start, Sandy; we are going to have a fine day to-morrow."

Jacky never closed either eye or ear all night, according to her own account to Tibbie Ryder afterwards, and was on foot at least twenty times in the course of it, thinking that the tap, tap, of a dry twig against the window was the first droppings of a

shower. With the dawn she was dressed, and stole softly into Margaret's room, and found her lying fast, fast asleep; and she slept on long and soundly too, as if the great crisis of her life were not coming up with the sun over the crest of the eastern hills. Jacky had hired a substitute into her kitchen for the day, not intending to lose sight of her "bonnie," any more, until the Colonel carried her away in his carriage and four, as she declared to her representative; the old servant was as splendid and bridal in her own appearance as a new red satinet gown and a profusion of white ribbons and net about her head and neck could make her, and feeling very stiff and imposing in her unaccustomed finery, she ensconced herself bolt upright in the chair beside her young mistress's pillow, and patiently awaited the moment of her waking. Her solemn grey eyes watched intently the pale yellow flush in the sky, which presently cleared off and left it blue, with a few flecks of mist and clouds over the hills; Fernbro' did not look very propitious with his night-cap half on, but she resolutely averted her gaze from him to the brighter promise in the east. For several minutes Margaret had been awake and contemplating Jacky's grotesque magnificence with suppressed fun before her gentle little laugh made the old woman aware of it; then she turned suddenly and clasping her tight in her honest arms exclaimed pathetically—

"Oh, my bonnie bairn, my bonnie bairn! an' we are boun' to lose you to-day, then?"

"Jacky, if you cry, I'll never forgive you!" exclaimed Margaret, detecting a watery tendency in her eyes.

"Cry!" echoed the servant scornfully; "Jacky's not the doited body to cry on a marriage morning! I should think not, indeed."

"Is the sun shining?" Margaret asked, rising on her elbow; of course, she knew it was.

"Yes, t' sun's shining—it's like a spring morning."

"What o'clock is it? it must be very early yet."

"I don't know exactlings what o'clock it may be—nigh hand eight I suld think; but whatever o'clock it may be here's Mrs. Joan Clervaux an' her woman coming round by Wildfoot! Jaques needn't ha' come yet awhile, for if she thinks she's going to lay finger on you to-day she's sorely mista'en! I am going to dress you mysel' this last time o' all, my bonnie precious bairn!"

"Certainly, Jacky—nobody but you to-day. But are you quite sure the sun is shining? I think there's a cloud coming up——"

"Nonsense o' cloud, you're boun' to be married to-day!"

"I don't believe it, Jacky—I think I am only going out on the moor with Oscar."

"You'll believe it fast enew enow! do you hear that? It's Mrs. Joan Clervaux at t' door, an' now she's coming up."

"Run, Jacky, tell her to wait in the summer parlour half an hour. I must have a time to myself—I want to *think*, Jacky—I want to get a view of my new life that is coming, and to say my prayers if I can!" She spoke with sudden excitement, and the servant at once obeyed her. Left alone, there was, for a space, only hurry and confusion in the young girl's mind, and all the prayer she could say was, "God be good to me! God keep me!" Her mother's pitiable fate recurred to her most vividly just then, and seemed to compel her to reiterate again and yet again, "God be good to me, God keep me!" Why that cruel remembrance visited her at that moment was strange, unless it were meant to teach her young heart, while it was softened by happiness, a lesson of the tender grace of mercy and forgiveness; *she* thought so, for while her own brief entreaty for protection was on her lips, she felt in how great need she might some day stand, and the idea flickered across her that had her unhappy mother put up such a petition she had not spoken in vain. "Oh! God be good to me, God keep me! God in thy great mercy, pardon her!" said she aloud, "and teach me to pardon her too!"

"Did ye call, my bairn?" asked Jacky through the door.

"No, Jacky, I did not call; but tell Mrs. Joan Clervaux she may come up now." Mrs. Joan did not linger, and Jaques and Jacky followed her in almost immediately, but not before the excellent old lady had had time to ask her young favourite reproachfully if this was a wedding-morning face that she had got on:

"I could not help thinking of my mother," Margaret said in explanation.

"Think of somebody else now, and let the smile come into your eyes again, Gipsy: I don't like mourning brides," replied her old friend; and then, Jaques having been jealously stowed into an out-of-the-way chair, with an intimation that it was only permitted her to offer words of suggestion and advice, the

important ceremonial of tiring the bride began. Margaret submitted to it with beautiful patience so long as she was allowed to be near enough to the window to watch the weather, but if any part of the process withdrew her from it only for a moment she immediately grew restive; no one knew better than she how treacherous were the Mirkdale skies, and how apt they were to change from smiles to showers at nine, at noon, and at sunset, and the first of these critical hours was drawing near with threatening shadows on the fells.

Tibbie Ryder had made it in her way that morning to come up to the Grange with a letter, and now sent a message to Margaret that she might be suffered to "gladden her failing auld eyes wi' a sight o' t' last bride she suld may be ever see," and leave being granted, up the old woman came. "It was not a few she had seen, and not a few she had helped to busk i' her day either," she said, "but surely Margaret Holt was the bravest bride she'd known sin' Philip Langland's came to Wildwood."—And indeed Margaret was, to borrow Tibbie's expression, as *brave* and as beautiful as the heart's desire, and Jacky's praise did not sound far-fetched when she cried exultingly: "Oh, my bonnie! thee's too like an angel by far! I daren't kiss thee: speak loud out 'at I may be sure it's Marg'ret!"

Until the veil was thrown over her, Margaret's pulse had been beating rapidly, but it seemed as if its clinging, filmy folds sent a chill through her veins, and Mrs. Joan felt her slender fingers grow cold in her grasp. Jacky was fastening on the wreath of white blossoms and arranging it with her utmost taste and care, when her young mistress said suddenly, "The sun only comes out by fits and starts."

"Never mind the sun now, Gipsy, Colonel Fielding is come," replied Mrs. Joan cheerfully. "Will you go down stairs, or shall Jacky bring us our breakfast here?"

"My father would like me to be with him; tell him to come up," Margaret said, opening the casement and looking abroad doubtfully. Sylvan Holt obeyed the summons without delay, and on entering her room was greeted by his daughter with the question—"Did he not think it was going to rain?" He gazed for a few moments across the valley to a point where the clouds were gathering ominously, and then, on pretext of making an examination from the other side of the house, he went to Colonel Fielding, who was impatiently awaiting his

destiny in the summer parlour, and told him that Margaret was becoming alarmed about the weather, and that unless they hurried to the church immediately there would be no bride for him that day.

Mrs. Joan Clervaux's chariot and Colonel Fielding's new travelling carriage were already waiting at the door; and Margaret, having been imperatively commanded by Jacky to swallow a cup of coffee, was hurried by her father into the former, while Mrs. Joan and the Colonel followed in the latter. Jacky, Jaques, Anty and Anty's wife stepped into the Beckford chaise, and were driven rapidly after them; and poor Oscar, forgotten in the bustle, and quite unable to assign a reason for it, deserted the house also, and trotted down to the church, where he took up his position in the porch. Just when he arrived his mistress was waking out of a feverish trance to find herself standing before the altar-rails, side by side with Rupert Fielding, and a nightmare of faces, having Mrs Sinclair's and Bell Rowley's prominent in the foreground, all around her. Mr. Wilmot read the service solemnly, and its effect was solemn on all present; though the church was crowded with spectators you might have heard a pin drop. At the beginning of that awful exhortation to which thousands have listened as an empty formula which did not include the opening of the secrets of *their* hearts at the last great day, it was observed that the bride lost her rosy blush, and instead of keeping her eyes downcast, raised them frequently to the window over the altar. About midway, some one in the porch exclaimed, "It rains! how unlucky!" and then she turned her head half-round and seemed to listen for that voice again more than for the minister's. Mr. Wilmot noticed the straying of her attention, and recalled it by making a full stop, and then went on. "I require and charge you both, as ye shall answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For, be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together, otherwise than as God's word doth allow, are not joined together by God, neither is their matrimony lawful." Margaret, poor child, had no secret to disclose, no treason in her heart against Rupert Fielding, but she heard a sharp rattle of hail, and a heavy plash of wet boughs against the window, and shivered.

It seemed to the bystanders that Mr. Wilmot made a longer pause than is customary after uttering this adjuration; but Colonel Fielding stood perfectly calm and self-possessed, only now and then unconsciously twirling his moustache, and when the moment came for him to plight Margaret his troth, the words issued from his lips with all the fervour of a vow made to be kept. After that the ceremony appeared to be soon over, and the wedding party adjourned into the vestry to sign the book, while the uninvited witnesses in the church began to indulge in free comments and criticisms.

"He ought to have kissed her! it is quite the fashion now," said Bell Rowley, who was highly indignant at the omission; "he looked as stiff as a ramrod, and I do verily believe he was thinking more of Mrs. Hamilton all the time than he was of her. I know that trick of his with his moustache—he never does it except when he is annoyed and agitated, or very nervous."

"Hush, Bell! don't say those incautious things; there is no knowing who may hear you!" interposed Lady Rowley, with as much severity as she dared use in proving her eldest daughter; Bell did not care who heard her, if it was true, she said.

Round about the font, where the old women were collected, Tibbie Ryder was promulgating shreds of the supernatural backed by her acquired and actual knowledge. "They'll be happy, please God," said she, shaking her head in a manner that implied great doubts; "but what a bairn she looks aside of him! An' he's may be had ane afore that he loved better nor her. If you'd asked me six months back, I suld ha' gi'en her to young Martin Carew, Mrs. Joan Clervaux's nephew. What does t' rain forebode 'em? Why, sorrow an' tears! Hark till t'!" Jacky, bearing a grievous countenance, came past them to look out at the weather. "It blaws a hurricane, an's an evendown pour, Jacky—how misfortunate!" said Tibbie to her.

"Stuff o' your misfortune!" returned the old servant, angry that her own superstitious previsions should have found an echo; "do you think folks i' this day are fules, to heed a sup o' rain at their weddings? Talk to Robbie Clarke, an' he'll set ye right."

Tibbie did not venture to utter her retort aloud, but she wagged her head significantly at her other gossips, as much as

to say that they all knew what Jacky's bit of bad temper meant—"she was afeard for the marriage turning out badly because of this ill-omened storm, else she would have looked blither; and the storm was ill-omened—who could deny it? Coming on so sudden too, just when the minister opened his lips to begin the service, as if for the very purpose!"

When the rain increased so as to drive into the porch, Oscar retreated into the body of the church, and as his young mistress issued from the vestry, leaning on Colonel Fielding's arm, he stalked gravely forward to meet her with his congratulations. Margaret stretched out her hand and patted his head as he trampled on her white dress all the way down the aisle, and somebody heard her say to her husband as he led her to the door, "Look, look, how heavily it rains!" So heavily that when she was getting into the carriage—there being no umbrella to hold over her—a drift of wet streamed upon her head and sprinkled her face with drops like tears. Colonel Fielding thought they were tears, and was beginning some tender expostulation, when Margaret smiled and said they were only raindrops.

And through all the violent pelting of the storm they were driven back to Wildwood. On arriving there, however, they found the door shut and no one present to receive them; for Jacky, anxious to make all safe in her absence, had locked it and carried off the key in her pocket, forbidding her temporary substitute on any pretence to relinquish her watch at the rear of the premises lest some ill-conditioned people, such as there were plenty about just then, should creep in and steal any of the numerous imperials, trunks, and cases standing ready in the hall awaiting the bride's departure. In consequence, for nearly ten minutes they had to stay under the partial shelter of the porch, Margaret shivering in her cloudy raiment, and striving hard to prevent herself from breaking out into a passionate fit of weeping, while the Colonel's restless hand went up to his moustache again and again!

Presently the second carriage, with Sylvan Holt and Mrs. Joan Clervaux, arrived. Margaret's father looked as wretched as wretched could be, and, as he rejoined his daughter and her husband, he said with a shudder, "Was there ever such an unfortunate day? What a journey you will have!" Oscar, all drenched and miserable to behold, now bounded in amongst them, and Jacky, full of grievous self-accusations and apologies,

appeared at last with the house-key, and the door being opened, they all hurried into the parlour. Margaret immediately went down on her knees in front of the crackling wood fire, and soon cheered up under its influence and some quiet assiduities on the part of the Colonel, who seemed in a terrible frame of mind lest she should have taken cold.

"We will start, Margaret, as soon as we have had breakfast and you have changed your dress," said he, eager to escape from the gloom that seemed about to pervade the whole party.

"Let us wait until after twelve for a chance of the rain clearing off, will you?" Margaret asked; he assented, and then looking at his watch perceived that there were nearly two hours to wait.

It was the strangest wedding! Even Mrs. Joan Clervaux, whose bounden duty it was to be cheerful and make conversation for the whole party, looked almost dreary as the rain rained on, and the wind dashed it against the streaming panes. At half-past eleven she convoyed Margaret up-stairs, and Jacky, in the midst of a series of spasmodic efforts to be very gay, helped her to put on her travelling dress, while Jaques, indignant at Oscar's footmarks on the white one, carefully packed it up.

"I am sorry it has turned out such a wet day, Gipsy," Mrs. Joan said.

"I feared it would, but never mind, I don't feel to care about it now," replied Margaret, "and if you look at Fernbro' you will see it is brightening. But, Mrs. Joan, I am thinking of my father—it never struck me so forcibly as it does now that I am *really* going away from him; how mournful, how very mournful it will be for him in this old house alone."

"Don't be anxious for him, Gipsy: he will be anticipating your promised visit by and by, and I should not be surprised if you were to induce him to come over to Abbeymeads when you are settled there."

"Do you think so? I wish he may, but I dare not be sanguine. I fancied he seemed particularly dull and heavy just now."

"That is only natural when we remember that he is losing you; but for my part I have considered him looking better since he got over the reaction that followed his hurried journey abroad."

"Sometimes I have thought so too ; he is less excitable, but he is often dreadfully low-spirited."

"You see, Gipsy, when people have gone through a sharp fight of afflictions and begin to grow old, they have not your elasticity to rise up against the dark hour when it comes upon them."

Margaret sighed, and then exclaimed almost rapturously, "Oh, Jacky, Jacky! there's a gleam of sun on the wall!" She rushed to the window, threw it open and announced, "The rain has ceased and there's a glorious bow in the clouds! I am so glad I shall not have to leave home in a storm! Cheer up, Jacky! it must rain from sunrise to sunset, you know, to be a truly unlucky day, and now at noon it is coming out all bright again!"

And so was she! When she rejoined her father and Colonel Fielding in the parlour, her face was beaming with unfeigned joy. "Look how the sun is shining!" exclaimed she, pointing to the gleams upon the distant hills; and she only clouded over again for a moment or two at the final good-byes. Nobody was inclined to linger long over them; a kiss, a very fervent blessing, a promise to write soon, and Margaret found herself seated in the carriage with Colonel Fielding, and rapidly leaving the old free life and the dear old home behind her, while Jacky peevishly lamented her own and everybody else's neglect in not providing a shower of old shoes to throw after them for luck.

To philosophise on the dulness, the dreariness, the emptiness of a house where there has been a wedding, after the bride and bridegroom are gone, is a work of supererogation which has been performed so often before that it shall not be attempted again in this chronicle. Of course, it was dull, dreary, empty—the two inmates to whom Margaret had been all in all, felt lost and strange, as if they had been suddenly transported by some bad necromancer into a locality hitherto unknown. They went up into her room together after Mrs. Joan Clervaux left, and collected stray tokens of her presence—a glove on the floor, a handkerchief on the bed, and a few half-withered flowers in a china cup on the mantel-shelf. Her old leghorn hat and maud they left lying on the hall table where she had last thrown them, and poor Oscar, who drooped and pined miserably for a week after his bright young mistress was spirited away from him, used to go and glower at them interrogatively

every morning, as if they were to be moved by his grievous loneliness into taking a walk with him. Towards night, Sylvan Holt took out his old letters from the cabinet and revived the past, as if the present had not sting enough; Jacky went into the dairy and forgot herself in such a fit of crying as had never overcome her since tidings arrived from abroad that young Philip Langland was killed in Spain, and his fair wife was dead; and Mrs. Joan Clervaux, down at Oakfield, set herself to write a full and detailed account of that morning's event to her dear nephew, Martin Carew, adding in a postscript that she felt as dull and melancholy as if the child that had just left them had been of her own flesh and blood.

And as the hours went on with the travellers on their journey, the sun continued to brighten always over the winter landscape, and set so calmly that November seemed to have borrowed a day from fickle April, and Margaret's impression at the end of it was that she had had a fine day for her wedding after all; and that, in consequence, by all legends new and old, by all omens, and all wise and foolish sayings, her life then beginning was bound to prove lucky, and she and her worshipped hero and husband were ordained to live happily ever afterwards!

CHAPTER XL.

THE ARRIVAL AT MANSELANDS.

ON Tuesday, the fifth of December, exactly a week after their marriage, Colonel Fielding brought his young wife to Manselands. It was towards evening when they arrived, though not too dusk to trace the outline of the old mansion, which looked very grand and imposing against a background of lofty hills clothed to their summits with dark pine forests. The carriage proceeded slowly after they entered the park-gates, for they had come a long stage since noon, and the horses were tired; so Margaret had ample opportunity of noting the exterior of her husband's home as they approached it through the pale twilight.

"It looks a very stately place, Rupert; I begin to feel rather

afraid of all the strange people I am to see when those great doors open," said she.

"No need to be afraid, they will all look very kindly on my pretty Caprice," replied the Colonel encouragingly.

During the few days since their marriage he had discovered a variety of pet names for her, amongst which this was his favourite—"my pretty Caprice," and she, having received orders to that effect, indulged herself in calling him gravely by his grave sounding name, "Rupert," to which her lips, as the mood was upon her, could give all the tenderness, of the tenderest caress, or an echo of wilful defiance. Still, however, the same unapproachable awe lingered about the husband as the lover; the same sense of not being quite equal to or quite sufficient for him; though why this should be, seemed strange enough, for he appeared—nay, he was—warmly devoted to her, and already it was becoming within the range of possibilities that Rupert Fielding would ere long cease to remember that he had ever loved any woman as passionately and as entirely as he loved his pretty Caprice.

As they came within a hundred yards of the house, Colonel Fielding put his head out at his side of the carriage, and told the post-boy to drive a little faster, then drawing it in again he said to Margaret, "my mother is not in the old school-room to-night, the windows are all dark. I daresay they are gathered in the drawing-room waiting for us."

"What is the old school-room? it sounds pleasant?" Margaret answered.

"It is the most friendly and familiar place in our house; my mother takes her children there for loving talk. Oh, the old school-room has seen and heard a great many things—you must be introduced to it to-morrow."

Almost before the carriage drew up, the door was thrown wide open, and Margaret had a confused vision of many servants clustered within the hall, which was brilliantly lighted up by a lamp pendant from the ceiling, and a vast fire of pine logs. Then, as the Colonel took her hand and led her quickly up the steps, there came forward the laird and his wife.

"How d'y'e do, Rupert? And this is your Margaret, is it?" said the old gentleman, kissing her; "Welcome to Manselands, my dear, welcome to Manselands!"

Mrs. Fielding's reception of her daughter-in-law was much less warm, much less cordial. She nervously remembered their

previous meeting, and for a moment held Margaret's fingers loosely, without attempting to embrace her, but the next she clasped her close in her arms, and said, "My son's wife is welcome to his mother." Then she turned hurriedly to the Colonel, leaving Margaret to a bright, fairy-looking girl who was Cecy, and to another with a sweet, serious countenance who was Amy, and their affectionate eagerness effaced the chill touch in their mother's greeting. The girls would have taken her to themselves entirely, had not the laird advanced, saying she belonged to him for a little while; and drawing her hand through his arm, and kindly pressing it to reassure her, for Margaret, in spite of herself, was trembling from head to foot, he led her up the great staircase, and into a splendidly lighted room, where were already assembled some of the nearest kinsfolks, and brought her to the hearth, erect in the centre of which stood a lady no longer young, who took her hand with haughty condescension, and dropped it without the slightest pressure.

"Kiss her, Katie, kiss her!" said the laird sternly, and Margaret felt a cold touch on her cheek which burnt hotly for long after.

This, then, was Katie, her husband's eldest sister, "quite the dame and the Laird's pet," as her mother had said to Mrs. Joan Clervaux on that ever-memorable day when Mrs. Fielding and Margaret first met. Scarcely had the Laird brought in his daughter-in-law, when the Colonel and his mother followed; and there immediately ensued a great fuss of handshaking and congratulation from the uncles, aunts, and cousins. That being over, an awkward silence succeeded, which again emerged into a rush of talk. Colonel Fielding stood a minute or two in the midst of it, quietly observant of Margaret's reception by his kinsfolks, and then perceiving that she directed a little appealing glance to him, as if praying him to deliver her from this ordeal of eyes, he suggested to his mother that she must be fatigued after her journey, and that she had better be conducted to her room, and accordingly she was taken thither by Mrs. Fielding and Cecy, Amy, who would also have followed, being detained by Mrs. Grant.

The room assigned to Margaret had done duty as the state apartment at Manselands ever since the house rose from its foundations. An anointed king had slept in that bed, the head of the family always lay in state there, and, as now, the heir's bride was duly installed in the midst of its solemn mag

nificence, until the honeymoon had waned, after which she was transferred to the blue damask-room—a less imposing but much more pleasant place. Margaret, poor child, who was only acquainted with such splendours through the medium of Jacky's elaborate descriptions of the state formerly kept up at Wildwood Grange, turned quickly from the ugly rich tapestry, the gilding and carving, to the familiar fire, and said (the first remark she had originated since she came into the house),—

“It looks like home, this old-fashioned grate and high mantel-piece, I like it.”

“I hope that in a little while you will find all like home amongst us at Manselands, my dear,” Mrs. Fielding replied kindly, but still with an air of stiffness, as if she thought that Margaret meant to imply some sort of reproach or disappointment.

Cecy—frank, affectionate, warm-hearted Cecy—was busying her fingers to unknot Margaret's bonnet-strings, and to relieve her of the weight of her travelling cloak, but in the midst of her kindly offices, the dressing-bell rang, and Jaques hurried in. Mrs. Fielding rose immediately from the seat she had taken by the fire, and said to Margaret—

“We will leave you now, my dear; you have half an hour before dinner. Come, Cecy, remember you are always late.”

“What a tiresome bell! but never mind, we will have our long chat to make friends in the evening,” whispered Cecy, and snatching a hasty kiss from Margaret's lips, she ran after her mother to ask her if Rupert's wife was not the dearest, sweetest, loveliest creature that ever dropped from the clouds.

Margaret left to herself (for Jaques was as good as nobody in one sense, being neither a loquacious nor observant person) sank into an easy chair and gazed reflectively into the fire. She could not be *quite* satisfied with her reception, though she tried; her heart, which had been overflowing with love towards all her husband's people, was chilled, driven back upon itself. Mrs. Fielding seemed almost impatient of her presence, and could not hide it under her habitually gentle and gracious manner; and Katie's greeting!—oh, she could not bear to dwell upon *that*—she could only hope that Rupert had not witnessed it. Her cheek burned where the cold kiss had touched it; her scarlet lips quivered, and her eyes filled, as the momentary scene repeated itself. She never should forget it, she thought, and if she had known ——— It was very fortunate that Jaques interrupted this train of reflection by wanting her

to come and be dressed, or it might probably have issued in a crying fit, for her heart was very deeply wounded. A personal unkindness so marked and intentional had never been inflicted on her before, and she carried it straight to its true account,—her mother's guilty history,—and cruel shame mingled with her pain.

"Mrs. Joan Clervaux would like you to look well to-night, ma'am," said Jaques, who saw that something was amiss, but did not suspect what; "she is sure to ask me what was said. Will you wear the pearls, ma'am, or something else?"

"Oh, dress me quickly, Jaques, anything will do," replied her mistress carelessly; then after a pause, ending with a profound sigh, she rose up, stretched her arms wearily above her head, laughed, shook herself, and wondered how she dare feel dull for a moment when she was really so very, very happy. "I will wear the pearls, Jaques, my husband's gift," said she, many degrees brighter for the thought.

"Certainly, ma'am, of course; nothing can look more beautiful on you than them;" and Jaques put her whole soul into her labours, that she might have a perfect report in every respect to carry back to Mirkdale.

Margaret was standing radiant in the full light of fire and wax candles, arrayed in her rich white bridal dress when Colonel Fielding came in. She sprang to meet him, crying out that she was so glad, so very glad he had come, from which tone of delight he gathered that she had been a little grieved elsewhere; but unwilling to ask explanation or make any comment in Jaques' presence, he gently pressed her hand and then held her off for admiration, whispering that his pretty Caprice was a perfect fairy Queen! He had the greatest pride and delight in her glorious youthful beauty, and she was beginning to value it too, because he loved her the more for it.

"Where are the necklace and bracelets? come, let me clasp them on," said he; so Margaret sat down on the hearth, Jaques laid the pearls in her lap, and kneeling beside her the Colonel proceeded to finish his wife's toilette, a pleasant little office to which he had elected himself from the first.

"Oh, Rupert, you make me very, very happy," said Margaret, leaning her face down to his, and stealing one of her satin smooth arms round his neck when the putting on of the ornaments was completed, and Jaques was gone out.

"My darling! it makes *me* happy to hear you say so; but

what went wrong with you before I came? I know something did."

"I was only fancying——Don't ask, Rupert: I mind nothing when I have you to love me——nothing."

"But I mind, sweet, that no one should be unkind in word or look to my pretty Caprice——what was it?"

"Rupert, I have been thinking that you love me better than you did a week ago," Margaret said, evading the question skilfully.

"You grow deeper into my heart, child, every hour!" replied Colonel Fielding, earnestly; and looking into his wife's beautiful faithful eyes, a momentary self-reproach came across him for having been once almost cold to her: "you are the most precious of all to me now, Margaret, and if I see a shadow on your face, I must know what brought it there——tell me, darling."

Margaret ruffled up his slightly grizzled locks and bade him go and dress, or the dinner-bell would ring before he was ready to take her down to the drawing-room——perhaps she would tell him by and by. But Colonel Fielding wanted to know then, and his pretty Caprice, who had found out the pleasure of making herself entreated, would not tell him for any consideration.

"If there was a shadow it is gone," said she; "there is never a shadow for me where my hero is: I wish I could be quite, *quite* sure I was always sunshine to him."

"You are becoming the delight of my eyes and the desire of my whole heart, Margaret! Was it anything my mother said? Perhaps you misunderstood her, for she has a heart of gold, and would not willingly pain an enemy, much less her son's best treasure," said the Colonel, pertinaciously, for he was intent on preventing any repetition of what had hurt his young wife's feelings.

"Oh, no, she was very kind; but you are not to ask any more questions now. Kiss me and go."

Colonel Fielding kissed her, but he did not go.

"Was it Katie?" he inquired, and Margaret's treacherous cheek blazed instantly, but she lifted her eyes that glittered with irrepressible tears and begged him not to question her any more then, she could not bear it. His hand stole up to his moustache with that trick suggestive of annoyance as he said, "Katie was always proud, but she had no right——"

"Hush, Rupert, don't utter another word about it: if she dislikes me now, I must try to make her love me by and by," replied Margaret, closing his lips with her pretty hand.

"Who would not love thee, my darling, my pet!" and the Colonel gathered her fondly in his arms; "but I will have *no one* hurt thee, *no one*, let them be who they may. As my wife, you have a claim on the respect and consideration of every one in my father's house, and you shall have it."

"Oh, Rupert! let me have no claim on anything! rather let me win all. I don't care for respect and consideration without love," said Margaret.

"But that Katie, my sister, should have shown you her lofty airs! and you are not the first she has cruelly wounded. But I shall tell her——"

"I shall not let you go until you promise me to tell her nothing!" and Margaret made a pair of fetters of her beautiful arms from which he did not endeavour to escape until Jaques knocked at the door and brought in a bouquet of lovely winter flowers with the gardener's humble duty, and would Mrs. Rupert Fielding honour him by wearing them that evening?

Outside the door, standing in the shadow of the wall, and waiting to see the bride pass on her way down-stairs, was old Elspie the nurse, a very tall spare woman, rigidly dressed in the same ancient costume as she had worn thirty years back. The Colonel espied her, and bade her come in and see his young wife: so Elspie accordingly entered, making a solemn curtsy, and while congratulating her now bearded nursling on his marriage, she scanned his white shining lady from head to foot with keen critical eyes.

"Well, Elspie, what do you think of her? Is she bonnie enough to please you?" asked the Colonel, glancing proudly at his pretty Caprice.

"Oh! she's a grand young beauty! I like t' lukes o' her weel, tho' she's not like *yon other*;" replied Elspie, shaking her head. "But she'll be a right noble matron wi' a few more years ower her head, an' a stately mother o' your bairns. *Yon other* has *nane*, they say?"

Elspie's thoughtless allusion to *yon other* was very embarrassing to Colonel Fielding. He knew she referred to Frances Stanley, who many years ago had paid a visit to Manselands, where she had won all hearts, high and low, by her sweet

angel face and kindly tongue. Young Rupert was courting her then, and all the servants about the house—Elspie in particular—had made up their minds that she was to be his wife. Through all this long interval her name had been a tradition in the housekeeper's room, where it was still whispered that he had gone almost crazed about her when he was talked into leaving her behind and going to India alone. Margaret had to stand the difficult test of everybody's partial comparisons with this lost first love. As in duty bound, Elspie admitted her to be "a beautiful lady wi' the air o' a queen," but still her faithful memory disparaged her as not like *you other*, not like her dear brave Rupert's sweetheart when he was a lad!

The allusion, indiscreet and awkward as it was, happily passed unobserved by Margaret for two reasons;—in the first place the old woman's utterance was so indistinct that she did not clearly understand what she said, and in the second, her mind was wholly intent on extracting from the Colonel a promise that he would not speak about her to his sister Katie at all.

"You shall leave Elspie to talk to me while you go to dress," said she, drawing near to him and sliding her hand coaxingly into his; "but first—" and here her voice sank to a whisper, while Elspie became discreetly deaf. After a moment of doubt, a steady look into his wife's eyes to see that the shadow was really gone, and an irritated twirl at his moustache, he acquiesced in her wishes, and then, under a pressing injunction to make haste, he went away to dress. Such an injunction was not needed, for the Colonel was not likely to breathe very freely during the few moments he was under the necessity of leaving his young wife and Elspie together, because there was no knowing what mischievous revelations the old nurse's taste for reminiscences of a sentimental nature might lead her into making in his absence. He had the strongest possible anxiety now that his former attachment to Frances Stanley should remain a dead secret to Margaret, because he felt that a knowledge of it would give her insufferable pain and perhaps even a distrust of him. When he reappeared, however, all was safe. Elspie had confined herself to detailing all the accompanying circumstances of the old Laird's bringing home his wife two and forty years before—and what a noble pair they were! the bride so fair, like a flower, and the Laird—any one might see what he had been—the Colonel was his father over again; from which auspicious event she passed on to the birth of Alick—remarking

incidentally that the first child of a Fielding was "aye a lad bairn;" then to that of John, of Katie, of Rupert, and so through the whole family, adding illustrative scraps of personal history to the name of each. From her loquacity Margaret learnt many particulars of which she had previously been in ignorance, such as that Katie's marriage had been very "misfortunate," and that Alick, the first born and his mother's darling, had been killed while abroad in a common gambling-house brawl. "Ye'll find a black sheep in almost every flock, an' that puir Alick was ours," said the nurse, sadly. John, she related, was a bookish lad, and he died from the consequences of over severe study at the English university, just as he attained manhood and his family were learning to feel proud of the reputation that he had made so early. She had got upon the subject of Rupert, "a' the son we ha' left now," when the Colonel reappeared, and she was obliged to cut short her chronicle for that season, though she was just plunging into the story of his boyhood commencing with the exciting words—

"I remember weel ance how we thought we had lost him for good and a', an' my lady was nigh distracted—"

"Was thât when Jack and I were lost on Wuddering Moss or when I fell into the linn at Craigie?" the Colonel asked.

"It was neither t'ane nor t'ither, it was yon night you went out on t' lock i' the Laird's auld boat—ye'll ken?" Elspie suggested.

"Oh! yes, Elspie, but that is a long story. You must keep it for a wet day in the school-room. Now, Margaret, let us go down."

So the Colonel and his young bride descended to the drawing-room, while Elspie and the stiff English waiting-woman compared notes over the state bed-room fire for a little while, and then adjourned to the housekeeper's room to take their share in the festivities with which the coming home of the young Laird and his beautiful wife was to be celebrated in the servants quarters.

CHAPTER XLI.

MARGARET'S NEW KINSFOLK.

MANSELANDS appeared in full gala suit that night to do honour to the bride. The crimson saloon adjoining the drawing-room had been prepared for dancing, and all the ladies came in grand white robes as befitted the occasion. The silver gilt dinner service and the dessert set of priceless Sèvres china figured at table, and no one from the outward and visible signs of welcome could have suspected how very little real heart-kindness there was below. Colonel Fielding had said truly that the women of his family were noted for their beauty, but Margaret's loveliness threw even theirs into the shade—Cecy, the brightest and fairest of them, was slight and pale beside her, like a lily drooping sweetly in the presence of the queen-rose of the garden. The Laird was charmed into graciousness by the blushing simplicity of his new daughter, and when the dancing began he would not let her plead either reluctance or incapacity until she had walked through a set with him. That over she was permitted to retire to the almost deserted drawing-room and improve Cecy's acquaintance. The Colonel came and leant over the back of their couch to listen to their girlish talk, and was much amused by the themes on which they chose to exchange their opinions. Oscar was balanced by Cecy's Gordon, Crosspatch by an old white pony living on a retiring pension in the park, and Mayblossom by a young mare which Margaret was promised leave to mount whenever she liked. Mrs. Fielding and Katie were in a distant part of the room watching the little party on the couch and seriously discussing Rupert's wife.

"Oh, she is wonderfully lovely!" was Mrs. Grant's admission; "but she will be recognised by everybody who ever saw her mother. I would rather she had been less like her even if she had been less beautiful. Rupert is quite doting, quite bewitched—look at him as he listens to her——"

"We must be cautious never to let her think we remember that frightful story, Katie," Mrs. Fielding said gravely; "she is very readily touched—I shall never forget that passionate scene at Oakfield where I was so unfortunate as to speak of it."

"There is something very attractive about her childlike ways—how lovely her eyes are when she looks up at Rupert as she is doing now."

"I can forgive her much because she worships my son," said Mrs. Fielding, sighing. "I feel drawn towards her personally, but those miserable events are always before me. I cannot think how Rupert came to overlook them."

"Oh, mother, when I watch her I am tempted to think there was reason enough!" replied her daughter, forgetting her anger for a moment, and touched by Margaret's innocent beauty.

Mrs. Fielding quietly observed Margaret for some time and then said—"She certainly has a most beguiling face, and so had her mother before her: but I see temper in that short lip and fine delicate nostril. I am glad she is so young, for I think we may win anything through her love but nothing through her reason, and Rupert will find it easier to mould her tastes and fancies to his."

"I imagine they are very decidedly moulded already! I can tell from Cecy's gestures that they are talking of their dogs and horses. If you remember, Rupert said Margaret almost lived out-of-doors and was not very domesticated."

"Well, such as she is we must make the best of her! I could find in my heart to wish that, being her mother's daughter, she had proved personally insignificant. Into whatever company we take her she will be the most noticeable woman there, and we shall be terribly assailed with questions as to her origin, bringing up, and general antecedents—and what are we to say."

"Let the truth come out: it will save a thousand petty anxieties. When the worst is known, there is no more excitement for curiosity. Whoever questions me will hear the whole story with the information, into the bargain, that we disliked the marriage extremely: but that, disliking family quarrels still more, we have received her—as, indeed, we should have received Rupert's wife had he chosen to bring us home a cook maid or a South Sea Islander." Mrs. Grant infused as much bitterness and as much lofty contempt into her last few words as her tongue and her countenance were capable of expressing; she spoke like an angry, disappointed woman, some of whose best feelings had been curdled by a sour draught of misfortune, and as she ceased she met her brother's cool, detective gaze fixed upon her face. Though highly indignant at the blight he had chosen to bring on the family honour, she was far from wishing to

betray her sentiments either to him or to Margaret, but sometimes the proud impulse of the moment was stronger than her sense of right or expediency, and broke out as it did in her reception of her brother's wife with such marked coldness, and again, as now, in irritated, insulting expressions, which were no sooner uttered than she longed to recall them; originally, Katie, though a proud, was a kind-hearted creature, but of late years she had grown cold, self-concentrated, and distrustful, and those who knew her history were not surprised at it.

"Hush, Katie, be cautious," whispered Mrs. Fielding; "the child herself is a good affectionate child, and Rupert will never forgive any slight offered to her: he seems to me to be standing over her in a defensive spirit already as if something had vexed him."

Mrs. Grant supposed, and not unnaturally, that Margaret might have told her husband of the little scene at their introduction, but relying on her youthful pliability for speedy forgetfulness of that or any other idle sting it might soothe her pride or her temper to inflict, she replied—"Perhaps he thinks we are neglecting her—*she* is too much of a child to notice, but it would be as well not to annoy *him* by being distant and ceremonious: you had better go and talk to her a little."

Mrs. Fielding accordingly made her way to the group on the couch, and Cecy instantly vacated her corner for her mother, and deposited herself on a low stool at Margaret's feet. The Laird also joined them with a few good-humoured words of raillery to his son's wife on her young matronly sobriety of deportment; he could not understand her sitting still like an ancient dowager while those lively reels were going on, he said. Margaret felt instinctively that in him she had a cordial friend; and, perhaps, her manner in some way betrayed that she was more at her ease with him than his wife. He had a fine countenance, but still the resemblance between them was very tenacious and an expression more benignant than his son habitually wore. Before the elders joined them Margaret and Cecy had been speaking of Amy's going away to India after she was married, and it was into the midst of this conversation that Mrs. Fielding broke with a sort of half-reproach addressed to her daughter-in-law—"Rupert would not stay at home for *us*, but he stays for *you*!" The Laird smiled, and quoted the old adage, "My son's my son till he gets him a wife, my daughter's my daughter all the days of her life."

"It was my father's doing," Margaret said; "but for him I would not gainsay Rupert's return to India if he would take me with him, but I would never suffer him to leave me behind." It was an unfortunate admission this of hers, and surprised everybody, her husband no less than the others. He had never made it a subject of conversation with her either before or since they were married, because he was under the impression that she, as well as her father, absolutely desired his stay in England; and as it was a sacrifice of a really strong feeling that he made, he had honourably refrained from parading it. There were nearly two years of his leave to run at the time Sylvan Holt had wished him to give up the service; but that he had not done, declining to retreat on the eve of what threatened to become a serious outbreak, and only pledging himself in any event not to take Margaret away from her father, and to resign his commission if the then impending crisis passed over. He was born a soldier and an enthusiast, and would have desired nothing more ardently than to go back to India and carry her with him; when he heard her words his countenance kindled as it might have done at the sound of martial music, or at the familiar flash of steel and scent of powder—an indolent life would be abhorrent both to his nature and his habits, and bending over the hand of his beautiful high-spirited wife, he said—

"I knew Margaret was at heart fond of a soldier."

"No, no, she will be just as fond of the civilian!" cried the Laird, eagerly; "your marriage pledges you to stay at home, my son! We must keep you amongst us now; we cannot spare him, can we, Geraldine?"

"He will not leave us any more; Margaret will change her mind by-and-by about liking to go out to India with him," replied Mrs. Fielding.

"You would have to live in a bungalow with two horrid rooms," suggested Cecy, holding up a threatening finger; "think of *that*! Two rooms! and scorpions in your slippers every morning, besides snakes under the pillow."

"But think of the honour and glory he might win!" replied Margaret, laughing. "Rupert is right when he says, I am fond of a soldier; I am—I should like him to become a great hero to all the world as well as to me! I am very ambitious for him."

"Oh! you dear, enthusiastic goose! he would be abused in

the newspapers until your respect for him would be shaken if not destroyed."

"Cecy, Cecy!" said her mother in a tone of reproof.

"Margaret does not mind being called a goose, I am sure!" returned Cecy, the incorrigible. "I believe she rather likes it because it is familiar, and reminds her of some one at home—does it not? Yes, I was right! I saw it in your eyes the moment I said it! Who calls you goose? Rupert does not, does he?"

"No; it is Mrs. Joan Clervaux—the kindest old lady; the best friend I have—"

"I am comforted to find a companion goose, I was beginning to think I was an odd one! Katie, will you try to remember that I am no longer the only or the *greatest* goose in the world. Margaret is, because she says she would not prevent Rupert going out to India if he would take her with him!"

"The question of Rupert's going back to India was quite set at rest by his marriage," said Mrs. Fielding, gravely. "I will not have it spoken about any more. It is enough to lose my Amy."

"Of course, why does any one raise the question? Rupert is not going to India any more than we are," added Mrs. Grant, decisively. "He has married a wife and turned his sword into a pruning hook. Margaret, has any one introduced you to our cousin Phemie Blunte, one of the most sagacious and plainest of womankind? Phemie Blunte, come here and be presented."

This diversion was made with a view of checking what seemed to be passing into an awkward conversation, for Colonel Fielding had begun to fret his moustache significantly at the family sentiments, but he ceased as Phemie Blunte drew near, and recovered his equanimity.

This young lady's countenance at first sight was almost always provocative of a smile, it was so agreeably ugly, so grotesquely attractive and amiable; and it appeared none the less so now in the midst of all those beautiful and refined faces which turned to her simultaneously and caught the reflection of her beaming fun. Phemie was accustomed to say that her ugliness was a better introduction to her generally than other people's good looks, and that if she could not number many admirers amongst the other sex, she had not a single enemy amongst her own. Nobody was ever heard to utter an ill-natured word against her, though both in person and in manner

she was peculiarly open to sarcastic assaults; but then her nose in the air had such a charming frankness, her large crooked mouth so much geniality, her great grey owl eyes such a quaint unconscious simplicity, her freckles and round red cheeks such an absence of pretension. And besides, Phemie, though a clever woman, almost, indeed, a universal genius, did nothing absolutely well, and therefore rivalled no one in the matter of accomplishments; the only endowment she had to herself, and which nobody either envied or imitated, was a provincial homeliness of speech and occasionally a trenchant flash of wit which cut and scarred the wound at the same time, but left an indelible mark on the sufferer's memory. Margaret looked up as Phemie drew near, and bowed and smiled—nay, almost laughed, and then feeling how exceedingly rude she must appear, tried to resume her graceful placidity, but in vain. The mirthful girlish spirit would out, and she laughed a soft irrepressible little laugh, glancing inquisitively at Phemie all the time as if questioning her queer face whence sprang its risible influence; and the others laughed too, especially Cecy.

"Phemie, why don't you go on the stage? That comic mask would make your fortune: you see its effect," said Colonel Fielding.

"Yes, I see. Don't apologize any one, pray—if people don't laugh when they see me, I think they are not pleased. Why don't I go on the stage, Cousin Rupert, did you ask? Why, in the first place, you proud Fieldings would disown me if I did; and, in the second, one genius in a family is enough. The united common-sense could not support more, and Patrick has taken the place."

"We could not afford to disown you, Cousin Phemie. I would come to see you act if it were only in a barn," said Cecy.

"But you are not a fair representative of the family principles," replied Phemie; "look at lofty Cousin Rupert there, what would he say to such a blot on our scutcheon as a play actress? But there might be worse blots than that—eh, Sir Knight?"

Phemie meant nothing; she talked at random as she often did, but she saw at once that an unlucky application had been made of her innocent remark. Margaret crimsoned violently, though she did not suspect an intentional blow was aimed at her; and Colonel Fielding, though he maintained his grave

serenity undisturbed, could not help feeling Mrs. Grant's meaning eyes upon him.

There was a short awkward silence, and then the Laird said—

"Where is Patrick, Phemie? I have not seen him here to-night."

"He would not come," replied Phemie; "he is of no more use in the world now than a dead donkey—you see his book is out."

"Patrick's book out! Oh, what fun!" cried Cecy, clapping her hands. "What is it all about, Phemie? Do tell us."

"Infinite woes, devils, seaweed, nothingness, flowers, shrieks, bones, youth lost, love shorn, existence generally dismantled, and all sorts of balderdash!" hissed Phemie, curling her nose higher; "a most prodigal waste of words, good and bad, most of them so arranged as to have either no meaning at all, or else one quite at variance with that commonly accepted."

"Phemie, how dare you speak so irreverently of Patrick's labours? The family genius! some day, perhaps, to be its greatest honour. Can you not have an eye to his future?" said Mrs. Grant, sarcastically.

"Yes, indeed, I can. I see him out at elbows, thankful for the parritch he has been too cock-a-hoop to eat for breakfast, like the rest of us, since his book came from Edinburgh. He must have coffee now, which he drinks without sugar or cream, as the Arabs are said to do, because he is going to compose an eastern romance, and he hopes by this medium to imbibe the correct spirit, and to strengthen the divine poetic afflatus. To hear him talk you would think he had got a new dictionary at his finger ends. I am fast losing patience with him."

"Never mind his vagaries, Phemie; he shall read his poem aloud to us, and we will have a good laugh at him," Cecy proposed.

"Patrick would as soon read it aloud to my bantams. He has the smallest possible opinion of women. It was in that contempt his surprising genius first manifested itself; and that is what convinces me that it is only frothy fermentation, and not pure wine by any means. In his present ineffable composition he styles us 'toys of the moment,' 'feather-headed flights!'"

"*Frights*, Phemie?" Cecy asked, fiercely; at which all the rest laughed.

"No; *flights*. It is an entirely new epithet, warranted never adapted before to that sense or nonsense."

"But it is very impertinent of him to call us bad names even in poetry; and ungrateful too, because we petted him once, did we not, Amy? I shall hint to him in revenge that he is growing too plump to be a poet; my idea of a poet is a lank scared man with great bright eyes that look as if they were always seeing visions."

"A wrong idea, Cousin Cecy; poets don't starve now-a-days: they are sleek and comely as other men. But Patrick holds your theory, and drinks vinegar and sucks alum to keep himself within proper dimensions. It must be allowed that nature made him on a very homely pattern for a genius, but he says clever men are mostly ugly, and so consoles himself."

"He will come to his senses by-and-by, Phemie, and then you must make a writer's clerk of him," said the Laird.

"He won't come to his senses at Rowanbank, for everybody there conspires to pamper his infatuated self-conceit except myself. But you must all read the book. He has a cold and swollen face, or he would have come to see our new cousin. He is making a sonnet on her, but I left him set fast about the colour of her eyes—I have been watching them all this time without finding out whether they are blue, black, or grey."

Margaret, indeed, had not raised them from the flowers lying in her lap since Phemie's unfortunate allusion to a blot on the Fielding escutcheon, and when she now tried to smile indifferently and glanced up in her face, they were brighter than they ought to have been, and their colour, whatever it was, was drowned in an ominous glittering. Nobody, however, appeared to notice it, and after a little more idle talk, Mrs. Grant went quietly away, and, at the first opportunity, said to her mother:

"Till our own people know all the facts about Margaret she will be continually exposed to stray shots like Phemie's; better tell them, and save the poor sensitive thing the chance of a wound."

The Laird kept his place and conversed with his son, and when Margaret began to find herself free from observation, she resumed her chat with Cecy, while Phemie stood by vaguely wondering what had earned her the flash from those beautiful eyes, and Amy's serious kind face took a shade of sympathy and trouble quite strange to it.

Meanwhile, the reels went on vigorously in the saloon, but,

at last, there was a lull which attracted the Laird's attention. He hated to see any enjoyment begin to flag.

"Are none of you young things going to dance any more?" asked he. "Ceey, Amy, Phemie, be off with you, the music is at a standstill."

All three quickly returned to the reels; Amy, with Captain Knox, to whom she was engaged, Phemie with a cousin, James Elliot, who had long been trying to make himself acceptable to her, and Ceey with a short plump middy, also a cousin, named Willie Ryot, who had been in love with her since before he was short-coated. By-and-by there was a call for the Laird, and at length Margaret and Colonel Fielding were left alone together.

"Look up, Margaret, you must not be downcast to-night. Why don't you talk more?" said her husband in a whisper.

Margaret looked up now brightly enough; it was certainly with her as she had told him—all her shadows vanished when he was there and occupied with her. "I am not downcast, Rupert," said she; "I was only fancying again."

The Colonel spoke still lower than before. "Will my pretty Caprice leave off *fancying* for a little while, and take it on trust that no one here would hurt her willingly? Some of us are rather cold and proud, and some of us are careless, but all will learn to love her by-and-by."

"I will take on trust whatever you bid me, Rupert, and try to be patient——"

"My pet has such a treacherous face! A thought, a word, and the eyes flash and the cheeks glow—I like to see its changes, but I like to have them to myself. Will you strive to have a little more command over yourself, Margaret? Why should a chance word hurt you so?"

"Wait awhile, Rupert, and I shall grow harder, or learn to seem harder," replied she, with a smile on a lip that quivered.

"Harder! that I hope my darling never will—I would not have you suffer what would *harden* you for worlds!"

"Now, Rupert, it is you who are *fancying*. I am not likely to become very flinty while you love me, and for the rest I don't care."

"But I would have you care, dearest. I want my mother to love you; I want all my people to love you—it is good to have friends amongst good, tender women; you have lived too much alone already."

Margaret made no answer for a few moments: she was bat-

ting for that self-command which her husband so quietly recommended, and having obtained such a reasonable share of it as enabled her to speak, she said, "There is nothing that I desire more than that they should love me, Rupert; you believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, love, I believe you; and to ensure it you must try to keep your mind clear of painful subjects, and, above all, free from suspicion. I think nothing wins so much as habitual cheerfulness and happiness of temper."

"I have not to learn how to be happy and cheerful now, Rupert, I am both," replied Margaret, brightly. "No one ever thought me miserably inclined at home, and I am sure, I shall be gay enough here. I was glad to come, very glad—you know I was."

At the last words her head sank rather lower, and her face was hidden, but her husband saw the quick palpitation of her bosom, and wished he had reserved his unnecessary advice for a more private occasion—he really did not know how sensitive she was; except that she loved him fervently, and was warm and generous in temper, he knew very little about her. He was trembling lest she should begin to weep, as once before she had done at a reproof of his, when she quickly raised her face and said—

"Let us give up talking about tender subjects, Rupert; sit down here beside me, and tell who everybody is; I want to know."

He was charmed with her control, and immediately did her behests, refraining even from a word of praise or kindness, lest the effort should have to be renewed.

"And, first, who is that stately lady in the silvered brocade and feathers? she has a good old face," Margaret asked.

"And a good old heart. She is a cousin of my father's, Lady Katherine Erskine, and that brocade was the famous dress she went to court in, I dare not say how many years ago—three score, possibly. Those two tawny-headed lads are her grandsons. She is a fine needlewoman to this day—small recommendation to my pretty Caprice, that; and in her youth she was a famous huntress—some of her feats that I have heard my father tell would astonish even Miss Bell Rowley."

"That tall girl with the giraffe's neck—who is she? And who is that talking to her in the doorway?"

"They are Janet Murray and Willie Ryot's father. There

are bits of romance, Margaret, amongst all sorts of people. Janet Murray looks younger than she is, for before Sir William Ryot married his first wife he courted her, but through some misunderstanding they quarrelled and separated. She has worn the willow ever since, but now he is a widower with three children nearly grown up, they have renewed their attachment, and agreed to marry in the spring."

"Who is the old man with the mottled face whom that beautiful dark-haired young lady never leaves for a moment? How cross and irritable he seems. Is he her father or her grandfather?"

"Neither her father nor her grandfather, Margaret, but her husband; they are Sir Peter and Lady Browne."

"Her husband! she cannot have loved him. What in the world made her marry him?"

"You must ask my mother that question—there are divers opinions. Some incline to think that Sir Peter's title did it; others that she fell in love with his scientific reputation; but my mother would tell you that she had been disappointed elsewhere, and that she rushed into a hasty marriage by way of soothing or hiding her feelings. Some women do that rash irretraceable thing, and spend all the remainder of their days regretting it."

"Like poor Mrs. Hamilton," Margaret suggested. "Now tell me who is the thin weather-beaten man talking to Captain Knox and Amy?"

"That is Admiral Favell, our great man—my mother's brother."

"Mrs. Grant is coming. Now, Rupert, you shall see how good I will be," whispered Margaret, and as Katie approached she smiled gaily, and made way for her upon the coach. Mrs. Grant seemed pleased—though she knew quite well that it was a little innocent hypocrisy to gratify her brother which made Margaret receive her so graciously—and took the proffered seat, asking if she preferred not to dance.

"No; I should like to dance if I could," was Margaret's candid reply: "but as I was never taught, I must perforce sit still."

"I regret to hear you say so; I hoped it was a matter of choice, and that you disliked frivolity as much as I do: married women should not dance."

"Margaret is only a child, Katie, compared with you," said

Colonel Fielding, irritated at the implied reproach ; "and when a girl has only encountered love and pleasantness all her life, she must naturally feel inclined to every cheerful amusement."

"I never doubted it, Rupert. At Margaret's age you may remember that I danced on every occasion myself. I had not then seen enough of the folly and temptation of gaiety to wish to relinquish it. *Now* many things are clear to me that were all darkness then."

"Oh ! Katie, I am strongly inclined to think that your present feelings and the feelings of your youth are as a dull burning lamp to a clear daylight," replied her brother more gently. "Sometimes great troubles and disappointments project ugly, grotesque shadows over the road of life which lengthen as day declines."

"You do not understand me, Rupert, and you never will understand me. I am free from the shadow now, and can see straight before me to the end—and that end suffices me," said she, gravely, while her pale severe face took a more set expression than before.

Mrs. Grant never took any part in the amusements of the world now—she disapproved of all gaiety, all pleasantness, all naturalness in fact. Had she been a Papist she would long since have become a nun who would have invented new disciplines, and perhaps have acquired a saintly reputation at her death, but being a sound Protestant she had retreated into an iron Calvinism. Though unable to impose a new order of things in her father's house, she sat like a tacit reproach by the fireside, by the table, and gloomed darkly in spirit over the geniality of her kindred. Those who had known her as a girl, when there was no one more pleasing and brilliant than she, deplored the change, so little show of tenderness and charity had survived the wreck of her marriage.

This demands a brief explanation. When Katie Fielding was nineteen, she was wooed and won by a companion of her elder brother Alick—Captain James Grant. He was personally attractive, gay, handsome, accomplished, gallant, but still very far from being what either the Laird or her mother could approve. Katie, however, was wilful, and forgetting what was due both to her parents and herself, she let him inveigle her into a clandestine marriage and take her abroad. There he soon made her pay the penalty of her misplaced confidence. She, trained and nurtured in a pious and affectionate home,

was compelled to be the daily and nightly witness of the low, coarse, degrading habits of a man without principles, without fidelity, without even common decency. There was no kind of misery, no kind of suffering that man did not drag her through during the eight years of martyrdom that she endured as his wife. Her annual allowance from her father he spent at the gaming-table or with sottish companions, whom he would bring into her presence and force her by threats, even by blows, to sit down with and serve. Those delicate shoulders of hers were bruised and blackened by his violence often, and not seldom she pined and shivered within and without from want—want of food, of the common necessities of life. But her own people never knew it. Katie had been taught to regard a husband's authority as paramount, his word as law; and though she writhed under the galling yoke she never dreamed of breaking away from it. She had taken her vows upon her voluntarily, and in defiance of those who would have guarded her happiness better than she knew how to guard it herself; and she saw in her wretched husband's conduct a retribution of which she had no right to complain. So she sat down and bore it in a frozen passive silence which grew slowly into her heart, and turned its warm beating affections to icy coldness and distrust. When her husband's death released her from bondage she went home again to Manselands; but it was no more their bright winning Katie that her parents took to their arms, but a rigid, embittered woman, who seemed to view life as if it were only given her for the purpose of self-mortification. She still softened occasionally, and glimpses of her former fine, generous character would peep out, but for the most part she was stern and suspicious, and evidently kept strict watch and ward over her feelings, lest anything of what she would have designated weakness should get the better of her acquired severity.

Margaret's experience had never before introduced her to one of these self-concentrated characters, and the reception Katie had given her was sufficient to excite prejudice, but to please her husband she tried to talk to her naturally and pleasantly. Colonel Fielding took Katie's joining them as a sign of repentance for her previous slight; and thinking that perhaps they would grow sooner acquainted if released from his watch, he left them to themselves and sought the Laird in the saloon. But when he was gone a long silence ensued. Margaret observed the clear, unchanging outlines of Mrs. Grant's

face for some sign of her passing thought, but the mouth remained closely sealed, the eyebrows slightly raised, and the eyes cold and passionless as if carved in stone; and the longer she watched the more severe the countenance grew. Margaret did not like to disturb her statuesque calm; any trivial question or remark would have seemed an impertinence, and neither time nor place suggested to her graver subjects.

At last rousing herself from her absence of mind Mrs. Grant turned quietly, and looking Margaret full in the face, said, "I should like to know how you and Rupert first met, if you have no objection to telling me."

Margaret felt as little as possible inclined to make a confidante of this hard proud lady, but remembering her husband's injunctions against suspicion, she gave a sketch of the game of croquet at Oakfield.

"And the next time?" inquired Mrs. Grant. Margaret related the incidents of the day at Deepgyll.

"Rupert was caught there; he never could bear up against the sight of a woman's tears," was the remark this narration called forth.

"What do you mean?" asked Margaret, uneasily. She detected a fine tone of satire aimed at her in these few words.

"That your husband was a lost heart from the moment he saw you weep—he fell in love with you there and then," replied Mrs. Grant.

"All things must have a beginning, Katie," said the Colonel's voice behind; he had approached unobserved and overheard the last words.

"Oh! are you there, Rupert? I did not see you;" and Mrs. Grant rose and went away.

"You look tired, sweetheart," whispered the Colonel to his wife; "there is no need for you to stay here longer than you wish; Phemie Blunte and Cecy will dance the clock round unless they are stopped. Would you like to retreat?"

"Yes," said Margaret. So he took her up to that awful state bed-room, and then returned to the saloon and joined in the dancing, to please the Laird.

CHAPTER XLII.

A CRITICAL REVELATION.

JAQUES had been impatiently waiting her mistress's appearance for the last two hours: she had quitted the servants' company below in high dudgeon very early in the evening, and now looked big with some important news of which she only wanted a hint to deliver herself. But Margaret was busy with her own thoughts, and did not notice Jaques's red eyes and swelling indignation of countenance. It was not until she had completed her duties that an opportunity to speak was offered her. Margaret bade her wheel the cumbrous velvet couch to the fireside, for she intended to sit up a little longer—and she wanted her Bible—where was it?

"May I stay with you, ma'am, till Colonel Fielding comes up?" said she in a quavering voice, which was meant to excite attention, and succeeded, for Margaret immediately looked in her woe-begone face and asked kindly what was the matter.

Jaques began to cry. "The matter, ma'am!" repeated she, with an angry sob; "I don't know what Mrs. Joan Clervaux will say when she comes to hear it, but I never heard anything more insulting and wicked in all my born days, and I told them so and I left them—"

"Oh, Jaques, I am sorry any one should have wounded your feelings—who could annoy you here?" said Margaret, soothingly.

"It wasn't *my* feelings, ma'am; they might have said anything they'd liked of me, but it was about you, ma'am; and that passed my patience altogether. To begin ripping up old stories of who Colonel Fielding loved when he was a young man—and she a married lady too! as thin as a lath and with no more colour in her face than my white apron! I told them I'd seen their Frances Stanley, and that I thought nothing at all of her;" and having unbosomed herself, the stupid, faithful, sentimental fool wiped her eyes and felt comforted.

As for Margaret, the earth seemed to have suddenly opened and shut at her feet, revealing the hollow ground over which she had been walking in full confidence. Her heart stood still;

with the rapidity of a flash of lightning, a thousand words and looks recurred to her pregnant with a new meaning—a new and cruel meaning: and then one clear, cold, distinct thought confronted her; she had not her husband's entire love; she had given her all for his systematic, quiet, calculating, respectable, passionless affection—her all for what seemed less than nothing. Jaques, who stood watching her with awakened sensibility, saw her colour fade until her cheek was as pale as the lace that shaded it, and all her frame shook convulsively; and thinking she was cold she stirred up the fire and advised her to get into bed; but Margaret turned herself away with a sudden burning blush; and said impatiently, "No!"

"I don't wonder, ma'am; I dare no more sleep in that bed alone than I dare fly—it looks as awful as a church on a week day."

"You need not stay any longer, Jaques; and Jaques, remember you must not bring me any more stories from the servants," said Margaret, compelling herself to speak quietly: "I do not want anything else now; good-night."

"Let me put this shawl over you, ma'am, if you are going to sit up any time;" and Jaques brought a rich scarlet cashmere and drew it round her mistress's shoulders. "I shall bring you no more of their tales, ma'am, for I'm sure they'll not dare to speak to *me* again that way; I showed them over plainly how wrong and bad I thought it. Frances Stanley, indeed? I said, a marble statue and married!—"

Margaret could not bear this driving in of the nail any longer. "Go away, Jaques," said she, lifting her dark eyes to the woman's soft, sleek, insensible face; "I forbid you ever to speak on this subject to me again." And Jaques, bewildered and dismayed at having earned a reproof instead of confidence, took herself off in an affronted and haughty way which was quite lost on her young mistress.

Margaret was bodily tired, her head ached, she shivered and burned alternately. Oh! how she longed for her father, for faithful Jacky, even for Oscar, the poor affectionate beast whose love for her was beyond a doubt—she was so helpless where she was, so miserably deceived and disappointed, so indignant both at herself and her husband—but beyond and above all was the cruel aching of her heart, full of a passionate tenderness and jealousy. "He will never love me as he loved her," she said—and that was the sting of her suffering.

She trembled at every sound lest it should be his step approaching, but one hour passed, two hours; the house became still, the guests were gone, but the Laird and his son were together, and the time slipped by unobserved. When he came into her room, at last, she had fallen asleep on the couch; her head had slipped down amongst the cushions, and her eyelashes lay long and wet upon her flushed cheeks. He had entered so softly that he did not awake her, and as soon as he saw the relaxed *abandon* of her attitude his first thought was, "Some one has told her of Frances Stanley." Quick, shuddering sobs disturbed her unnatural rest, and while he was gazing at her in puzzled dismay, she awoke with a start of affright and a pleading cry—"Don't leave me, Rupert; don't leave me!"

She sprang to her feet and stretched out her hands. She had been dreaming that some one was drawing him away from her; but when she saw her husband standing before her, she recollected why there was that strange aching pulse in her heart, and fell back hiding her face in her hands.

"What has happened, Margaret?" cried Colonel Fielding, eagerly approaching her.

She shuddered away from his arms, and asked, looking sorrowfully into his face—

"Why did you take me away from my father? Why did you make me your wife when you loved Frances Stanley better?"

Colonel Fielding twirled his moustache and met her gaze sternly; his conscience admitted the accusation to have been true once, but not true *now*, and he was angry to find himself suspected.

"Margaret, I should be excessively indignant at your suspicions, if I did not know how frivolous and absurd they are," said he, in a harsh tone; "how can you be so childish?"

She trembled violently.

"Let me go home to Wildwood! let me go home to my father!" cried she, passionately. "You do not love me, you are cruel!"

Such a bloodless pallor and anguish overspread her countenance that he thought she was fainting and caught her in his arms; she struggled to release herself, but he did not let her go.

"Listen to me, Margaret; you must listen to me," said he, in a low concentrated voice, which spoke out of the deep new passion of his being; "I will not let you throw away your happiness and mine for a jealous thought."

"You hurt me, Rupert," moaned she, writhing in his fierce grasp, and lifting her pitiful young eyes to his. He drew her closer to him, and kissed her quivering lips again and again—then she began to weep.

"Oh, my darling, my darling, you know I love you," said he, with passionate fervour; he could feel the hard, painful beating of her heart against his breast, and, perhaps for the first time, he got a glimpse of what it would cost him to lose it; he must win her *now* or win her *never*; vanquish all doubts, or lose the great stake for which he would have pledged his life, and the eager love that was kindled in his heart touched his lips with truthful fire.

"How dare you talk so wildly of leaving me? Could I live without my sweet pet?" said he, tenderly. "Ten years ago I *did* love Frances Stanley, and I cannot unlive that time for you if I would; but it is quite passed, and she is no more to me now than any other dream. But you are *real*, my wife, my own, my very own! I love you best of all and before all. Oh, Margaret, you must, you shall, believe me."

For all answer she raised her face glowing with a divine beauty, and wreathed her arms round him as he kissed her and felt he had conquered.

Yes, that victory was won—she knew of his former love and was more his than ever; and he—he was more hers too—there was nothing his heart desired besides hers; in her beautiful, loving presence, Frances Stanley was truly but a vanished dream. He was glad this revelation was made; it set him at ease with his conscience, and increased his fervent love for his young wife. To lose her! to lose her! it would be reviving with tenfold misery every pang he had ever suffered: to have seen the possibility enhanced the treasure.

"Oh, darling! you must not try me thus often!" said he, in a tone of fond reproach; "it is a dear triumph." And Margaret could not be sure whether the glittering which obscured his worshipped face was in her eyes or his; perhaps, it was in both; but she did not, could not, look long, for their lips clung together in a kiss of mutual forgiveness and love.

CHAPTER XLIII.

LIGHT CLOUDS.

PHÉMIE BLUNTE had left an invitation for as many of the party staying at Manselands as chose to go over to luncheon on the following day to Rowanbank, but Colonel Fielding declined for himself and Margaret, pleading that he had laid out several excursions on horseback which she was to take with him alone, before he should permit the general body of kinsfolk to claim her. What delicious excursions those were, and how happy Margaret was in making them; her perfect love had now cast off fear, and her soul exulted in the certainty that she was idolized as much as she could desire—more than she had dared to hope! And thus a pleasant week—a pleasant fortnight flew by. Then sometimes the Laird rode with them, and sometimes Cecy, in whose lively company Margaret had learnt to be quite at her ease; but neither Mrs. Fielding nor Katie had yet relaxed from any of their ceremonious observances towards her, and their manner was rather what it should have been to a casual guest than to a relative. It was not that they meant to be cold or actively unkind, but their disappointment at the marriage had been excessive, and their wounded pride still ached whenever the thought of her passed before them; they could not be cordial with her even when they tried.

Margaret was much too quick of sight where her feelings were concerned to be inobservant of this; but as she had promised her husband to take all on trust, she tried to believe that their restraint with her was the fault of a characteristic reserve rather than of intentional slight. Yet she would never voluntarily be left with them alone; and often when the Colonel was going out shooting with his father, she would wrap herself in a plaid of his, and beg to be allowed to go too; he never had the heart to refuse her, for this brief return to the ways and customs of Wildwood always made her more gay and cheerful afterwards. Mrs. Fielding and Katie, of course, commented on this between themselves, and blamed him for granting her continued indulgence in what they considered as very unfemi-

nine pursuits, but they were too politic to go the length of telling him so; and after every fault-finding and bewailment over the marriage, they always ended by confessing that there was, besides her beauty, something so winning and sweet about Margaret that Rupert's infatuation was more to be deplored than wondered at. It did not surprise, though it annoyed them, to see how closely she kept to his side, and how little dependent she chose to be on any of them. In his absences she would take frequent refuge in that gloomy state bed-chamber, where, folded in one of the long velvet curtains, and sitting up in the window-seat to get a view of the bleak winterly prospect, she would watch for his coming home, and occasionally beguile a long twilight with listening to the stories of old Elspie, the nurse, as she used to do to Jacky's: she could not emerge from her simple and wild pleasures all at once. Cecy and Amy came too, now and then, and the three could be merry enough together, but the appearance of Mrs. Fielding or Katie always hushed Margaret into silence. Colonel Fielding saw, but tried not to see this position of affairs. He loved Margaret so that he had determined never to give himself the pain of bringing a shadow over her sweet face, and as for remonstrating with his mother or Katie, he well knew that would be vain, as he could not make them see with his eyes or think with his thoughts; he therefore refrained from intermeddling, in the hope that the good hearts would by-and-by discern each other's goodness and become attached as they ought to be.

But still the time went on, visits were paid, calls made, and though she had been a month at Manselands, Margaret had never yet been introduced to the old school-room, "the most friendly and familiar place within our house, where my mother takes her children for loving talk," as her husband had told her. For several days after her arrival she had kept on hoping that one or other of the girls would propose to take her there, or that perhaps Mrs. Fielding herself would bid her come, but neither event took place, and at last she began to say to herself, "They will not let me be one of them." She felt much more grieved than wronged at this, and was fain to console herself with the after reflection—"Rupert loves me best—" But she would have been very glad to know that Rupert's mother loved her too.

CHAPTER XLIV.

ROWANBANK.

COLONEL FIELDING and his wife had been nearly two months at Manselands when he said to her one morning—

“Margaret, I must ride over to John Scott's at Mirfield with my father to-day. What will you do with yourself until evening?”

“Cannot you take me with you, Rupert?” asked she.

“Not this time, my pretty Caprice. John Scott is a ferocious old bachelor, and only entertains men, or you should go:” and he kissed her to smooth the denial. Margaret was not selfish, or she might perhaps have tried to make him forego the visit himself, but such an exercise of her influence never occurred to her as possible, and the subject was allowed to drop.

Immediately after breakfast, the Laird and his son set out, while Margaret, from the hall door, watched them mount and ride off until a bend in the road hid them from her sight. This was the first entire day she had been left without her husband, and how to get through the long hours of his absence seemed a formidable task. She wished for Oscar's pleasant company exceedingly: there were unexplored hills and woods all around Manselands, but she did not feel free to go out here as at Wildwood quite alone, and Cecy never seemed to think of rambling on foot beyond the park-gates unless there was a visit in view. She was still standing in the portico, heedless of the cutting January blast, when Mrs. Grant came through the hall and asked what she did there.

“The Laird and Rupert are just gone to Mirfield,” was the reply.

“And you are at a loss what to do with yourself. Come in out of the cold, and we will try to devise something.” Mrs. Grant had from the first taken a tone of patronizing, compassionate superiority towards her brother's young wife which it was very hard not to resent, but Gipsy was learning a lesson of self-control under her discipline which might perhaps one day stand her in good stead. She came in, and followed Katie to the sunny morning room where Mrs. Fielding and the two other girls were at work.

"Here is poor Margaret, a widow for half a day—how can we entertain her?" said Mrs. Grant in a tone of assumed despondency.

Margaret's blood mounted hotly to her forehead; for once she both felt and looked indignant, and, turning sharply round, she would have gone out again immediately had not Mrs. Fielding spoken.

"If you will take a book for half an hour, my dear, when I have finished my letters we will have a drive together, you and I," said she: so Margaret, still quivering with suppressed anger, ensconced herself in an out-of-the-way corner and pretended to read. But the volume had not much interest for her; she began to feel Manselands almost intolerably irksome, and to wish herself away. "And why should we not leave it?" she thought, "Abbeymeads is waiting for us. I will ask Rupert to night when we are to go home."

But before Mrs. Fielding's correspondence was concluded a visitor appeared in the person of Miss Phemie Blunte, and created a good-humoured diversion.

"Cousin Rupert is off to Mirfield for the day, so we can have Margaret at last!" exclaimed she. "Cecy, get your hat and cloak, and you too Amy, and all of you come over to Rowanbank with me for luncheon. I'll bring them safe home again, Aunt Geraldine."

There was no reason why Margaret and Cecy should not accept the invitation, but Amy must stay at home, because Captain Knox was expected; so in a few minutes they were on the road with Phemie, setting their faces, spite of the keen frosty air, steadily towards the crest of one of those long-backed, barren hills beyond which Rowanbank lay. Margaret soon brightened under the inspiriting sensations of freedom and exercise, and forgot her previous gloom and vexation: "After all, it was but a trifle, and what need I care when Rupert loves me?" thought she. "It would be wrong to tell him about it, so I will say nothing yet of going away; of course, he must like to be here amongst his own people—we should both be strangers at Abbeymeads."

Phemie Blunte was in high good-humour, and Cecy was gay too, and they infected Margaret with their cheerfulness, until, when they came to Rowanbank, she was as lively and happy-tempered as either of them. The sound of their voices and laughter, as they went up through the garden, called the

poet Patrick to his window to see what "feather-headed flights" were come to disturb his visions of a hermitage in the desert—that point in his Eastern romance having been already reached.

Rowanbank was a pretty old house in the summer, when the creepers that covered the walls were full of flowers, but now it looked rather cold and naked without, though within it was as cheerful as family affection and voices of many children could make it. Margaret thought it was almost like a school in recreation time, for noise and fun, and asked Phemie how many there were to make that agreeable tumult—Margaret was fond of children.

"We are twelve in number—four boys and eight girls—eight of the ugliest girls in Scotland. And my mother was pretty! Would you believe it?" replied Phemie unconcernedly: and she led the way to the dining-room where the hungry youngsters had assembled at the sound of a bell which the three girls had heard as they approached the house. Mrs. Blunte was in the midst of them striving to enforce silence while she said grace over the boiled mutton, but, as soon as Cousin Cecy appeared in the doorway, there was a universal outcry of welcome which obliged her to desist from the useless attempt. It was a scrambling early dinner that they all sat down to; but Patrick, whom Cecy wanted to see and torment, did not appear to partake of it, and when his mother was asked why he absented himself, she said he had given strict orders not to be disturbed on any pretence for two hours, as he was going to compose a lyric song. At the mention of Patrick's occupation, all the children, from Janet of sixteen to Jem of four, seemed profoundly impressed; for the space of three seconds at least they were silent, then all the tongues broke loose together, and all the suspended knives and forks clattered down on the respective holders' plates. Only Phemie looked scornful, and when dinner was over she immediately proposed to lead Cecy and Margaret to her brother's study in spite of her mother's entreaties.

"Oh! we shall not disturb him," said she, "I have no doubt that at this moment he is impatiently wondering why we don't go." And Cecy was very much of the same opinion.

When the study door was opened, Patrick was discovered sitting at his desk, attired in a tartan dressing-gown, girt round his waist with a red cord and tassels, and wearing a velvet cap on his ardent locks. He was very like Phemie in the face, only that a languid affectation in his countenance had usurped

the place of sound good sense in hers. For a moment he feigned to be oblivious of his visitors, but they all saw through the pretence, because he turned very red, and then, with a well-acted gesture of surprise, he jumped up and said he was very glad to see them. All over his desk were ranged scraps of print cut out from newspapers and reviews, and these he appeared to have been studying when they came in. Cecy, who had coolly possessed herself of the poet's own chair and left him only a corner of the table, for Margaret and Phemie were installed on the only other available article of furniture—to wit, an old sofa—asked him what they were. He said they were the critiques on his poem, and that he had been trying to reconcile their conflicting opinions, but in vain.

“Read them, Patrick, let us all hear what they have got to say about it,” Phemie suggested. But the young poet was far too diffident for any such exhibition, so Cecy proposed to do it for him, to save his modesty.

“If you *will* read them, Cousin Cecy, you might as well take them in the order in which I have laid them, for so I estimate their verdicts; some of the last ones have no literary weight whatever,” said Patrick stroking his chin: and as Cecy began to read, his countenance shone with gladness, but as she progressed it was eclipsed by clouds, and finally gave way to bitter contortions of derision and anger.

“This extract is from the ‘Day,’” Cecy said, as she took up the first fragment, and Patrick, having incidentally remarked that it was one of the most liberal and enlightened organs of the time, she, to the astonishment of all but one of her auditors, read the following gratifying announcement:

“A true poet has at last arisen above the horizon of contemporary literature, and mounted at one glorious, triumphant swoop to the very zenith of Fame! He who assaults the admiration of the reading public and takes it by storm under the name of Desbrow Will-o'-the-Wisp, has, at his first flight, conquered the realms of Parnassus. We *can* say no more: we *dare* say no less. Let all lovers of true poetry at once invest five shillings sterling in the purchase of these, ‘Hoots of a Strayed Soul in the Wilderness.’”

Here Cecy was seized with so severe a fit of coughing that Phemie was obliged to undertake the next critique, which ran as follows:

“‘It ever delights us to wreath the brow of the youthful

poet with bays? We have many great ones amongst us, but Desbrow Will-o'-the-Wisp may take his stand amongst the greatest. This volume scintillates with genius, passion, and fire. The soul of the writer has undergone the fiery baptism of sorrow, and has come out of it refined, purified, and exalted, as the soul of the feeling man must ever be. We hail his advent with pæans of praise!"

"You would scarcely expect to find so much discrimination and clearness in a professedly 'Lady's Newspaper,' would you?" said Patrick. "There is no jealousy, you perceive, but a ready, ungrudging accordance of what is felt to be done."

Phemie went on stoically from the "Sphere:"

"Gentleness, pathos, tenderness, are the characteristics of this admirable poem. It may not be true in Art, as those more ready to carp at faults than to admire beauties assert (but what is Art now-a-days?) yet it is delicious to read, and inundates the refined soul with images of beauty." Cecy was heard to murmur discontentedly, "feather-headed flights." Phemie laid hands next on the "Pillar," which generously stated "Desbrow Will-o'-the-Wisp to be a Poet in the true sense of that much used and much abused word. He thrills our bosom," it went on to confess, "alternately with sweetness and agony. Since Byron startled the world by the explosive gusts of his forceful genius, we have read nothing finer than these 'Hoots of a Strayed Soul in the Wilderness.'" The "Critic," less exuberant, remarked that "the poem was rather wordy and high-flown, but still not discreditable for a first attempt: it predicted that it would find its admirers amongst the very young disciples of the spasmodic school who still prefer sound to sense."

"Stay a moment, Phemie, let me speak," interposed Patrick, laying his hand upon the other fragments, "I want to warn you against being prejudiced by these—*these*." (With a scornfully ironical glance at the unperused critiques.) "We authors have no greater calamity to contend against than the spiteful jealousy of lesser minds—such minds as are betrayed *here*," and he released the "Spy," of which Cecy possessed herself with unseemly avidity, saying she thought she could read a little more now.

"There is promise in this poem (by a lady, we presume, from the fantastic choice of pseudonym)," the "Spy," insidiously began. "It is rugged in parts, and full of startling but quite ineffective transitions. The writer is trying new ground (we

suspect), and she reminds us of nothing so much as an inexperienced skater, in the *grotesquerie* (if we may coin a word) of her rhymical movements. She is rather imitative than original, and much too diffuse. The story, spread over three hundred pages, might easily have been compressed into three."

"A serpent trying to be a dove!" sneered Patrick audibly.

"Oh, what fun, listen here!" exclaimed Cecy, whose eye had taken in at a glance the pith of the "Pioneer." "'These Hoots have a dissonant echo of every new poem that has afflicted creation during the last half-century. We protest against having our ears stunned by any more of them. If this writer would succeed, let him leave off studying books and study things. The issue of his present work is extreme boredom.'"

"What virulence, what spite!" gasped Patrick apoplectically, while Cecy, as if she had begun to enjoy herself, took up the "Searcher."

"'When Chanticleer gets up on the roof before daybreak to crow, all the neighbourhood wakes up, of course, and irreverent people answer him with sleepy execrations. Will-o'-the-Wisp is a chanticleer of this early kind, but even his impertinent cock-a-doodle-doo is not an original note; it is a borrowed strain at best. It is clear from his preface (why *will* poets write prefaces?) that he has not yet cut his wisdom teeth, or why should he disturb a weary world with his Hoots? We don't care a fico for his sorrows, but we will offer him a little advice—let him go into training under Messrs. Allen and Cornwell for twelve months ere he presume to take the muses' names in vain a second time.'"

"A most ungenerous attack; but I can bear it?" sighed the young poet, mentally entrusting his reputation to posterity.

"There is only one more from the 'Portico,'" said Cecy, mischievously. "Let us see what it says, Patrick; I think you are cruelly handled altogether. 'Portico.' 'Mr. Desbrow Will-o'-the-Wisp opens his poem thus:—

"Launched on the desert of this dark immense,
Where broods the night in robes of thunder-cloud,
Bordered with lines ensanguine, gashed with seams,
Buttoned with beads of blood upon the breast.
My soul sits in a bath of cruel, pungent flames,
Shrieking its wrongs against a deafened world.
Ordeal of misery, whence to go unscarred
Is to be clad in armour welded tight,
And thrice refined, and buckled on with spears!

Oh! earth, thou stony mother to the mind,
That gapes and yawns and gasps to take thee in,
Give to my panting lips thy luscious store,
I ask thy all of thee, but ask no more!
Let me depart replenished, singing drunk,
Drunk with the bliss of life, and night, and nothing!
Hail me, and crown me king."

With the reply that mother earth must have lost her wits indeed if she accede to this modest request, we dismiss Mr. Desbrow Will-o'-the-Wisp to the repose of his publisher's warehouse, sincerely hoping that in all our literary pilgrimage we may never again encounter that dismal individual.' That is all," added Cecy, "and quite enough too."

"It is something to be abused by such men: it shows they fear the rising of any star that may eclipse themselves," said Patrick, "but such malignity always defeats itself; the world penetrates the smiling mask, and sees the corroded heart. Ah!"

"But where are the great Quarterlies, Pat? You said you should take your permanent stand on their verdict," Phemie inquired.

"Yes, *they* will do me justice, *they* are above paltering to the hour, but they have not noticed my poem yet," replied Patrick.

"No, nor ever will!" thought his sister, eyeing him dismally. "Oh, Pat, give it up!" she added aloud.

Patrick grinned and groaned a refusal, and then said, "Phemie, we did not make ourselves; we are as we are," which self-evident facts meeting with no contradiction, he gathered the critiques together and locked them in his desk to wound and heal his mind by turns in many a future perusal. That accomplished, he went and propped himself against the side of the window, and glowered at the tall bare trees that shut out all view of the hills beyond the garden. During the reading of the reviews, Margaret had not dared to open her lips to speak. Yet she should be beguiled into a laugh, but now she ventured to ask would Mr. Patrick recite some portions of his unappreciated poem—they would be more gentle than the critics, she was sure.

"I don't want patronage, and I don't want flattery: they are abhorrent to me!" returned Patrick, with more candour than civility, "and I must beg to be excused." No one pressed him to do what he was longing to do, so by and by he

relented, and, after toying with some loose leaves of his new manuscript for a little while, he treated them to a canto or two.

"Thank you, Cousin Patrick, thank you!" cried Cecy, striking in quite unexpectedly between two stanzas: "you must be tired, so pray don't repeat any more. It is a wonderful story, and you have a wonderful flow of words! I cannot think *how* you do it." Patrick smiled with lofty condescension:

"No one expects it of you, cousin Cecy," said he; "women are not creators."

Cecy knew by experience that he was impervious to retort, so she passed the contemptuous insinuation by, and asked if he would walk to Manselands with them, that his sister Phemie might have company back. Patrick graciously consented, for he wanted an opportunity of holding forth in the presence of Margaret, in whose countenance he thought he detected signs of an appreciation of himself such as he had long ceased to expect from Phemie or his cousin Cecy. Having therefore wrapped a plaid about his short bulky figure in the most picturesque fashion he could devise, he announced himself as ready to escort them whither they would. "Home to Manselands, the nearest way," Cecy, as leader of the party, said. Patrick at once elected himself to be Margaret's companion, and having hinted to his sister and Cecy that three or four was an inconvenient number for conversation, he was permitted to have her all to himself—perhaps not unwillingly, because Phemie had a confidence to impart to her cousin touching James Elliot, whose name has been once before mentioned in this history in connexion with hers.

When Patrick had manœuvred Margaret and himself about fifty paces in advance of the others, he opened the conversation by such general questions as, Did she like Scotland? and What did she think of the scenery, climate, and national character, so far as she had been able to form an opinion? but as replies formed no part of his idea of an agreeable talk, he gave no time for her to speak, but passed forward to expatiate on the deterioration of things in general and of poetry in particular, which quite naturally brought him round to the consideration of the themes ever uppermost in his mind—namely, his poem and himself.

Margaret betrayed no impatience of the everlasting subject, probably because she had not been required to manifest an interest in it to the exclusion of everything else a hundred times

or so before; and Patrick felt so sure of her attention that he spared her not a single detail on which florid sentences could be hung. "When I commenced upon my poem, the critiques upon which you have but this moment heard, I had quite another design in my mind from that which I ultimately worked out," said he, sublimely secure that he was imparting to Margaret as much pleasure as he felt himself. "Last year I made a pedestrian tour through the south of France, and many incidents occurred in the course of it which would have woven themselves into a fabric of alternate grave and gay, had I held to my original purpose; but I was diverted from it by the merest trifle—I really forget what now—and the result was my volume of 'Hoots.' Genius has wayward moods in which 'tis impossible to bind her to drudgery—she must soar on the inspiration of the moment, or she will never hit the mark!"

Margaret courteously expressed a hope that the pedestrian tour might furnish matter for his next work.

"It may, it may: but imagination sweeps reality before it," replied Patrick, enjoyingly. "Still, what could be more humorous than a description of Beaucaire at its annual fair time? or what more pathetic than the story suggested by the aspect of the mad English lady at Doctor Lenoir's? And incidents multiply as memory retraces the route—"

"A mad English lady! Who was she? Where did you hear of her?" asked Margaret, trying to check the shiver that ran through every limb.

"I don't know who she was; I never inquired. And if I had inquired, it is scarcely likely I should have found out—the Doctor's was a private house, not an asylum," replied Patrick: "I happened to be laid up with a sort of fever for nearly a fortnight, and was lodging in a house which overlooked the garden where she walked. Somebody said she was English, and mad"

"What was she like? What did she do in that garden?" Margaret asked.

Patrick was astonished that her interest should be so speedily diverted from the consideration of the noble theme of poetry to so common-place an incident as his having seen an insane Englishwoman walking in a medical man's garden, but as she seemed really curious he condescended to reply that he dared say she had been beautiful once, but she was as awful as one of the furies then—if she could imagine a fury.

"But describe her to me, will you? I am sure you can," Margaret persisted with nervous eagerness.

"Yes, I can describe her, for as I had nothing better to do I used to watch her by the hour together. I used to think she might have been an actress. She was tall and thin—as thin as old Katherine Erskine; her face was haggard and dark, and her eyes stared frightfully, and her black hair hung down her neck like coils of snakes. She was not pleasant to look at at all, you know, but she fascinated one like a bad dream. She was sometimes quiet, and sometimes she ran round and round like a horse in a mill until I expected to see her drop; then there was her screaming—I was glad to cover my ears then, I can tell you, and not hear it. She would stop and point at the ground as if she saw something, and begin to yell like mad. Ugh! it was like the devils in hell! and then the doctor always took her in-doors and shut her up, but I could hear her for all that. And sometimes she used to come out with a doll dressed like a baby, and pretend to nurse it, you know, and sing to it and dance it up and down. I declare that was the worst of all."

"I don't want to hear any more; I think I can see her!" said Margaret faintly.

Patrick was delighted by this testimony to his power of graphic description, and said, conceitedly—

"See her, I should think you can; she haunted me every night; Doctor Lenoir must have had an awful time with her; but the incident is highly suggestive, is it not? so many romantic possibilities are contained in it, some pathetic, some grotesque, some wild and horrible."

Patrick's habit of prattling on without requiring any answer was now a fortunate one, for Margaret had ceased to hear what he said. She was hanging up in her memory a companion picture to that beautiful and graceful vision that she had once seen by chance in her father's room at Wildwood. Patrick never perceived her distraction from his enthralling conversation until they reached Manselands, when she walked straight through the hall, and left him in the midst of an elaborate sentence, without even a pretence at the civility of thanking him for his escort, or saying good-bye. But Patrick hid his wrath, because Phemie and Cecy, on coming up, began to rally him on having bored his new friend until she ran away to escape his society. Patrick sneered loftily, and replied that Margaret

had soul; implying that his two tormentors had none, and went home sulking.

Margaret had gone direct to her room, thrown off her bonnet and cloak, and sat down in front of the fire; but there was something more than the coldness of the winter day upon her that made her shiver and weep so bitterly. "I knew it all before; I have learnt nothing new," she kept saying to herself; yet all the time she felt that a vague horror had been developed into a living scene by the description she had been listening to. She never doubted for one moment that this poor mad woman was her mother; and such a deep pity and sorrow had fallen upon her with that assurance, she hated her former hardness and cruel denunciations. Oh! what would she have given for the power to soothe that broken heart! even for the remembrance that she had always felt for it as she ought to have done. "Heaven will be more merciful than I was," she thought; "how wicked I was! how unfeeling! I said I hoped God would forget me in my misery, if I ever forgot our wrongs. I wish I had never used those words. She loved me—my father said she loved me—I believe she did; I'm sure of it! She always remembered she had had a little child. If God gives me a child I pray it may love me; to have a little soft cooing baby, and never, never, never to see its face! Oh! I wish, I wish my father had taken me to her. What is that about sin being visited from generation to generation? Oh! no; it cannot come to me; Rupert and I are one; we love each other, our child will love us—we are not like my poor father and mother. I know now how fearful her lot must have been, tied fast—no escape but death or sin—Oh, God! keep us from such temptation!" With love had come to Margaret many gentle experiences, benign charity, forgiveness, pity—she was a better creature than in her proud indignation, and a happier too.

CHAPTER XLV.

SWEET AND BITTER.

A WET day in a country house full of active people almost always hangs heavily on hand, especially when it rises wet and

continues a steady, uncompromising down-pour, which leaves no room for even the fluctuations of hope that it may clear up. Such a day it was that followed the visit to Rowanbank; nobody could reasonably set foot out of doors—none of the ladies, that is. Some of the Erskines and Bluntzes drove over, however, towards noon, and after luncheon Cecy proposed that they should all go up into the long gallery, and have a game at shuttlecock and battledore to warm themselves—a proposal that was acceded to by universal acclamation. Margaret had passed the morning in writing long letters to her father, and she was glad to share the active fun, but Colonel Fielding and Katie sat in one of the windows and talked together.

“Won’t you play, Rupert?” Margaret asked, between two of her own not very successful games with the younger Erskine. He said, No; he preferred looking on; and so she went back to try whether she could accomplish Cecy’s feat of keeping up the shuttlecock for a hundred strokes without letting it fall to the ground. There were several failures before a success, but it was done at last, and joyfully announced.

“What a complete child she is!” said Katie, rather contemptuously; “and to hear her call you Rupert sounds so familiar too.”

“But very pleasant—I assure you I like it,” replied the Colonel, watching Margaret admiringly; “what would you have her call her husband?”

Katie blushed at her own jealous folly, though she had wilfully encouraged it until every sign of love and confidence that passed between her brother and his young wife was absolutely hateful to her. She began to think less of Rupert than she did formerly, seeing how completely his whole heart was given up to Margaret, whom she tried to despise, but could not. Katie was playing a perilous and wicked game under the specious guise of upholding the honour of her family—her self-deception was dangerous as it was subtle. If any one had charged her bluntly with striving by every means in her power to undermine a holy affection, and to put asunder those whom God himself had joined together, she would have started aghast at her unmasked thought, but for the present she worked silently—not letting her right hand know what her left hand did. “I trust Margaret will become more womanly by-and-by,” said she, disparagingly; “such a wild young thing at the head of a great establishment is really ridiculous when one comes to think

of it. For all her air of dignity and grace one sees she is only seventeen—you are nearly double her age, Rupert; she ought to have been older by half a dozen years."

"Her youth is one of her charms—I find her perfection, Katie; my sweet little wife!" There was no mistaking the feeling of this remark—intense fondness, implicit faith, and great content. The Colonel looked as if he thought himself a very happy and fortunate man; his sister glanced at him half contemptuously, and pretending to misunderstand him replied, that Margaret was not little but tall.

"True; she will be a stately mother of my bairns, as Elspie says, but *little* is an endearing word, you know, Katie," returned the Colonel, preserving the same air of satisfaction. Katie looked rather surprised and vexed, but this time she was silent, and Margaret's joining them herself ended the dangerous subject. She came up almost breathless with her exertions, and sliding her hand under her husband's arm she leant against him to rest; she had divined Katie's evil heart towards her, and this little action of hers seemed to say, "He is mine! I love him, he loves me; you shall not take him from me!" The wind and the rain together were making a grand hurly-burly over the hills, and sometimes they came driving up against the glass as if they would force it in, and Margaret's first words were, "Oh! Rupert, cannot you fancy how the storm is tearing over the moor and round about the Grange! I wonder what they are all doing there just now."

"Would you like to be transported back again?" asked Katie, coldly; "you look as if you could hear and see all that is going on there."

"I can!" exclaimed Margaret; "I can! My father and Oscar are in the parlour by the fire—who do you think they are talking about, Rupert? about you and me: and it is blind-man's holiday with Jacky in the kitchen; Mirkdale was very happy, was it not?"

The Colonel's arm changed its position for one round his sweet wife's waist, and as she nestled to him, Katie took herself away, thinking bitterly of her own married days, and this contrast where the husband was the lover still: she envied Margaret's happiness in her heart.

It was almost twilight, though the afternoon of the short January day was not more than half spent; one by one the players had seceded from the game; the Bluntes went home,

Amy and Captain Knox disappeared, and Katie took away Jem Erskine for a chat with her mother, so that, at length, Colonel Fielding and Margaret had the gallery to themselves. The Colonel shut the door, and they began to pace up and down and to talk about Mirkdale—a theme neither of them ever seemed to weary of. Presently Margaret forgot the previous day's good resolutions, and began to ask when they were to go home to Abbeymeads. "For that is to be *our* home, Rupert," said she.

"You are tiring of Manselands, Margaret; but we must not leave until after Amy's marriage next month," replied the Colonel. "How is it my pretty Caprice does not take better to my people? Are they not kind to her?"

"Oh! you know, Rupert; don't ask me. They are quite kind, but they don't love me—the Laird and Cecy love me, but not the rest; yes, Amy does."

"Well, sweetheart, it is their loss. We will leave Manselands as soon as Amy is gone, and on our way you shall have a few days at Wildwood. Does that please, my darling?"

"Oh! Rupert, you are dear! I was just longing for that! Now I can be patient, though I am half wild at the thought!" and in testimony thereof she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him with enthusiasm. "If I had known this morning when I wrote to my father I might have told him," she broke off to say. "How glad he will be, and Jacky, and old Oscar."

"I am afraid I shall begin to be jealous of Wildwood, Margaret. Are you sure you love me as much as those you left there—quite sure?"

"I will not tell you!" nevertheless she gave him the same token of it as before, and then looking in his face with an earnest gravity she said—

"You know, Rupert, I must have loved you better, or I would never have given them up. I think sometimes that before you came I did not understand rightly what it was to be happy, I have been so much happier since. If anything goes wrong with me, and I get grieved or put out, I have only to remember and say, 'Rupert loves me,' and all comes right again."

Colonel Fielding drew her fondly to his breast: "I like to hear my darling making these grave confessions," said he; "I know then that she trusts me and believes in me as I would

have her do—that she believes I am quite her own for ever and ever.”

Margaret knew what he referred to: “Oh! it was wicked in me to meddle with that past,” said she, hiding her face penitently; “but you have forgiven me, Rupert! You did not know you were to be my fate then, did you? But I knew, or hoped, mine was come very soon after I saw you; I used to dream about you when I was a child—I did, Rupert! and I seemed to know you at once, my bearded knight.”

“You little sly thing, so you took me captive. Katie said it was the Deepgyll tears, but it was not; it was your innocent brightness—I like sunshine better than showers. But, to be honest, Margaret, I did not love you then as I love you now, my soul’s darling.”

“Do you think I have not found it out? Oh! Rupert, I felt that you grew to love me more and more every hour after I was your wife; and I had some fears, when I heard what had been, that I had been deceiving myself—but now I know you as you are, and I am full of peace.”

She breathed a low sigh of perfect contentment and rested quite still in his encircling arm for a long time where they had seated themselves in the window. Neither the wind nor the rain abated, but gradually the twilight gave way to darkness. Rupert could not see his wife’s face, but presently he felt her begin to tremble, and proposed that they should go to one of the warm lighted rooms.

“Stay a moment, Rupert dear; I want to ask you a question?” said she, in agitation when she could not quite command. “You once told me, before we were married, that you were acquainted with all the particulars of my mother’s death—will you tell me where she died? I never dared to ask before, but I have a reason now for wishing to know.”

“She died at Marseilles, under the care of a Doctor Lenoir—but, sweetheart, you promised not to cleave to that shadow.”

“I did, love, but it will come and go,” and then she told him very briefly what she heard from Patrick Blunte.

“Ah! poor soul, she loved you. You will think more gently of her for this, will you not, Margaret?” said the Colonel.

“Oh, yes, yes!” then drawing close to him, with her face uplifted and a most pleading wistfulness in her voice, she added, “Rupert, you know how hard and cruel I was about her, and what wicked things I said—and you know that in the Bible

about our sin finding us out and following us from generation to generation—oh! Rupert, if our baby should not love me.”

“If he does not I shall disown him—he will be a monster! why does your trembling little heart disquiet itself with such a wild fancy? Come here and be comforted!” His kind tone renewed her—it was a wild fancy, who but herself could have conceived it? she said.

“Now that I can see her broken and wasted with misery I am full of pity for her—but even my pity is half selfish; I know that but for her your mother and Katie would have loved me.”

“Oh, you impatient woman!” exclaimed the Colonel, almost in a rallying tone: “You cannot wait for the blossom to set and become ripe fruit, but you hastily shake it down and set your teeth on edge with its crudeness. They will learn to love you yet, Margaret; rely upon it.”

“I wish they could have loved me now; it is strange to me to have an enemy.”

“They are not enemies, darling; bide your time; I know it will come. So much love has always waited on you, you grow covetous, my pet.”

“Oh, Rupert, if I fancied *yours* could lessen I should curse the day when I was born!” whispered Margaret, tremulously.

The answer to this was a caress, and an assurance that *that* could never, never, *never* be. She was more precious to him than all the world besides, and always would be—with more lovers’ oaths than can be quoted. Margaret said it made her glorious to hear him ~~speak~~ so, and felt that she could never weary of listening to his vows; he had not made love to her before they were married, and he did it now instead.

Happy hour, soon past! The door at the further end of the gallery opened and Cecy came in.

“I see you two sitting up there in the window,” cried she, out of the gloom; “I don’t think your courting days are ever to be over! If you can spare each other for five minutes my mother wants to speak to Rupert in the old school-room. I will keep Margaret company till you come back to her.”

“No need, Cecy; Margaret will go with me,” replied the Colonel. She whispered something in his ear, to which he answered, “Not wanted; never been there before? Well, never mind, come now. No; I am not going to part with you,” and they went off together.

"I give notice to all whom it may concern, that I shall not marry until I find some one as nice as Rupert," announced Cecy, solemnly.

"I only know one person who is at all likely to grow up to him," replied Margaret, laughing and happy.

"Who is it? Tell me his beautiful name."

"Martin Carew—Rupert knows him. He is over the seas and far away in India; away for ten years, perhaps; oh, Cecy!"

"Other people have been ten years over the seas and far away in India and have come back; oh, Margaret, I shall wait."

"Cecy, what flippant nonsense you are talking; who has taught you that, I wonder," said Katie's austere voice, as she came suddenly upon them from behind. "It is you, Rupert, we want, and no one else. Let Cecy and Margaret go and chatter their secrets over the library fire."

If Katie could have seen her brother's face, she might have been warned by the flashing of his ordinarily calm eye that she was rousing a dangerous spirit; then Margaret felt the insinuated impertinence, and said so painfully, "Oh! Rupert," as if claiming his protection against this cold, vindictive woman. "Tell my mother I will come to her in a few minutes," said he, abruptly; and then he turned short round with Margaret and took her to their own room. Jaques was there preparing for her mistress's evening toilet; there was a blazing fire and plenty of candlelight to betray the sudden tears shining in Margaret's eyes and the white anger of her husband's face. He bade Jaques leave the room, and then he whispered Margaret not to cry.

"Katie is become as hard and insensible as a flint. Oh! I wish I had never brought you to Manselands!" exclaimed he, passionately.

"Don't be sorry, Rupert; see—I will not care!" and her tears cleared away as she drew herself up proudly. "Katie is unjust and cruel—she is trying to wean your love away from me, and she hates me because she cannot."

Colonel Fielding could believe this now, and his countenance looked particularly savage. Margaret was fain to smooth it in her own magical fashion, but this was rather hard to do when he saw the red spot burning on her cheek, which showed how the implied taunt had wounded her. He must draw out that

sting at all risks. "We both heard what Katie said, Margaret, and we both took up her meaning," he began, while his dear wife's face drooped and burnt with the sensation of her insulted womanly modesty; "she intended to hurt us, but she no more believes what she hinted than I do, my darling—than I do, who know you to be the purest, chastest, best in soul and body, of all living women! You have not given me the first and freshest of your youth and love that I should set lightly by them—I am graced and honoured by the possession of you, my sweet wife. Look up, dearest; your heart is open as a book to me, and I know there is not a thought in it for which you need blush—you will not weep then for the malicious words of an angry woman!"

"No, Rupert, I will not. You know that I came to you pure and that I love you—let all the rest go! I am happy." And she lifted up her face and kissed him as if to set a seal upon her words. There was a conscious dignity of innocence, nobleness, and rich tenderness in her young form and countenance as she now looked and spoke: her dark blue eyes shone with soft, pure light, her cheek kindled with a lovely blush;—all the woman in her was awakened—not that holy instinct only which is a passionate and faithful love, but the fortitude that would endure and suffer all things for the sake of one. Like Undine, a new soul seemed to have come to her with her husband's love.

There was a short silence between them, during which he worshipped her with his eyes and heart as men worship what they wholly love; then she put her hand in his and said, smiling, "Now go and talk to your mother—don't let there be any quarrel for me, Rupert, lest you should reproach me in years to come. Let them remember me only as a poor, patient soul who had not spirit to resent an insult."

"You must come with me then, or I will not answer for myself; come."

"No, love; I don't grudge you to your mother; go alone; I shall not interfere between you two, but I am not at peace with Katie yet; I cannot be when I see how her false wicked words might sunder us; but I will try to get into a more Christian frame of mind by the time you come back, for you know, Rupert, I would rather not let her know her power to hurt us."

"Then you are the worst dissembler in the world—she sees you avoid and fear her."

"Fear her! no, indeed, I don't, Rupert; you are mistaken! That would show a distrust of you when I have none. We chose each other, and God has blest our love; I don't think He will let her destroy it."

"I am sure He will not, sweetheart! There, you are not going to the old school-room with me?"

"No." And so Colonel Fielding left her, and sought his mother's presence alone.

CHAPTER XLVI.

FAMILY TRIALS.

THE old school-room was on the second story of the house and at the east end of a long passage—out of the way, quite, for the *young* Fieldings were a noisy, high-spirited race, like most healthy, happy creatures, though they tamed down at the approach of adolescence. Formerly it used to echo out of lesson-hours with pealing laughter, merry shouts, and wild whoops, as if there was a party of freshly caught savages in possession of it, but it was quiet enough now that all the children were men and women grown—quiet enough and melancholy enough. In itself it was a dull room too, overlooking the wildest sweep of hills in the district, and with only a paved court below the windows; and a haunted room—haunted by the ghost of every trouble that had come upon that generation, yet they all loved it.

To Mrs. Fielding it was especially dear. Ever since her children were little about her knees, she had been used to come to it and them daily for their pleasantest hour of recreation. All the small griefs and pleasures of their youth were brought to her there for sympathy and comfort. They had always been a most affectionate and united family, and the familiar old study was the place where they had seemed to come closest together from first to last. It often happened now that the mother had it to herself; then she would sit in the twilight and conjure back particular times and seasons and the moving young figures with them. The rough sketches on the walls she valued far

above costly paintings, because they were the work of her first-born son—poor Alick. There was John's old desk and his college cap upon it, and his prize books, dearly won. Sometimes she could recall his pale presence so vividly that she seemed to have him on the faded settee by the fire opposite to her, with his head leant down upon his thin hand, and reading by the flickering light of the pine logs, while she, full of visions of his great future, could not forbid the work whereby he earned himself an early death. There was her beautiful Geraldine, now happy wife and happy mother; there was Katie, proud and wilful, yet loving and honest-hearted then; there were the two young ones—Amy, who was so soon to part from her, and sweet Cecy, still half a child, whom she might hope to keep for her own for a long time yet. And there was Rupert, the Rupert of a dozen years ago, and another fair young maiden—his betrothed; his mother can often see the two figures standing by a window apart from the rest; he is scratching Frances Stanley's name upon the glass with his own below it, and the girl stays by him blushing and smiling as the diamond ring cuts the queer crooked letters and is then slipped on her finger and sealed there with a lover's kiss. The curtain falls over the pane, but the two names are still there. There is a great gulf between that time and this—let us return to the present quickly.

When Colonel Fielding entered the school-room, his mother and Katie were seated one on each side of the fire, and Cecy, rather flushed and warm, as if she had been shedding a few angry tears, knelt on the hearth with her arm lying across her mother's knee. It was too evident that there had been an exchange of sharp words also, for Katie looked excessively pale and haughty, while Mrs. Fielding appeared nervous and agitated; there was an uncomfortable air of restraint and displeasure over the whole party very embarrassing, but the Colonel appeared not to see it, and drawing in one of the cumbrous old chairs to the fire he sat down, and asked what special communication had caused his mother to send for him.

"I wanted to tell you, my son, that poor Grant Hamilton is dead," was the reply.

"And Frances Stanley is free!" added Mrs. Grant, with contemptuous bitterness of tone and manner. "Frances Stanley is free just when you had let yourself be inveigled into a marriage with that poor insignificant child, Margaret!"

"How dare you, Katie! you are wicked, wicked!" cried Cecy, springing to her feet and bursting into tears. "Margaret is dear, she is good, you shall not speak of her so falsely when I am here: you shall not! I will tell papa to order you not." She was running from the room when the Colonel, recovering himself from the cruel shock of Mrs. Grant's evil suggestion, called her to come back.

"Thank you, my generous little sister," said he; "but leave me to fight my own and my wife's battles; and don't seek Margaret now."

"I won't, Rupert, if you wish me not; but don't believe a word that Katie says; mamma loves Margaret; I know she does, only Katie won't let her show it. You do love Margaret, mamma, you said she was pure and good and true as ever the other was, and that Katie did not let herself see what she would rather not see!"

Cecy's impetuous spirit broke out in a right cause, but her sister tried to sneer her down, and the Colonel told her to go away, this quarrel was not fit for her to meddle in. Then he turned to Mrs. Grant with an expression of fierce concentrated wrath in his face, which made his mother cry, "Rupert, Rupert, my dear, dear son!" and cling to him with both hands round his arm. "Be still, be silent one moment! Oh, Katie! if my children hate each other, my heart will break!" and she fell to sobbing and weeping.

Colonel Fielding adored his mother; he held her in a close embrace for several minutes without speaking, but the working of his features showed what a passionate struggle was going on under his silence.

"It is not you who hurt me, mother," said he, at last; "it is Katie's bitter pride and jealousy. I think, Katie, the devil has got possession of you."

Mrs. Grant tried to laugh, and stared in his face with a wretched, defiant fear, which she strove in vain to conceal from his keen resentful gaze. He fascinated her with that gaze, then subdued her; after a moment or two she began to falter and change countenance.

"I did not intend to hurt you, Rupert. Have I said anything against you? Why are you so tenacious?" asked she, confusedly.

"You have lost sight of plain honour and honesty, Katie; that is what you have done," was his stern reply. "You have

striven to undermine my love for Margaret, by depreciating her to me—thank God! in vain; thank God! in vain! And now you dare to speak openly as if our sacred marriage could be regretted by me. What would be the results if I shared your feelings? Do you see the slough of misery such words as yours might prepare for all of us?"

"Oh, Rupert! let me go to her, I will make up for all!" cried his mother; "I see it now, Katie; you have striven to put asunder those whom God himself has joined together. Come with me, we ought to ask her forgiveness on our knees," and she ran to her daughter.

"I am not conscious of any wrong to Margaret—I will not go," was the hard rejoinder. "Frances Stanley was my friend. Is it my fault if I remember how Rupert loved her, or if I cannot call that child he has been beguiled into marrying her equal?"

"Katie, I leave you—you are malignant. Frances would be the first to rebuke your hateful spirit," said her brother fiercely.

"I knew it; even yet you cannot utter her name without a change in your voice. You prefer her to Margaret this day!" cried his sister, with triumph.

"Are you gone mad, Katie? You must be mad, or worse—deliberately wicked. Frances is a very painful memory to me, Margaret is a most sweet and pleasant reality; can you doubt which I love? If you can, I tell you plainly that the world holds nothing so dear, nothing so altogether precious for me as my young wife!" And with those words he left the study, and returned to Margaret.

Mrs. Fielding did not attempt to follow him, she was afraid of his excited mood; but Katie, now that he was gone, broke out into fierce invectives, all false, all cruel, as the mean pride and jealousy she was nursing in her bitter heart.

"Rupert's marriage has ruined him; he is become coarse in feeling; his honour and delicacy are obscured," said she; "that is always the fate of a man bound to an inferior woman—we shall see how it will end. I hate that slim, beautiful, fond fool of his: I hate her!"

"Katie, Katie, hush, do hush; this is wicked, indeed!" entreated her mother.

"And I believe she is going to have a child, he hinted something of the kind; what a mother for his children she will be!"

"A child! Oh, Katie! if she had thought I loved her she would have sought me. I have not done what I ought; I will go to her now, poor motherless girl, and crave her pardon. I cannot let my son, my only son, be weaned away from me!"

"She will wean him from all of us before long," responded Katie: but Mrs. Fielding was already half-way down the passage on her road to Margaret's room and did not hear her. She knocked and asked tremulously for admission; her son opened the door.

"Come in, mother; Margaret wants you," said he, taking her by the hand. She was extremely agitated; her face quivered with pain, but there was such an eagerness of affection in the young wife's eyes that in a moment they were clasped in each other's arms, weeping, and sobbing, and forgiving each other. "Now we have had tears enough for one day; dry them, smile, and open your hearts!" said the Colonel, willing to end this trying scene. "You have both got some arrears of confidence to make up, and I shall leave you to balance the account." And accordingly he went his way, not sorry to avoid the explanations, confessions, and tender women's talk which he foresaw would follow that long, tearful embrace, for already the violent feelings of that day had shaken his strong nerves considerably, and the hand he pressed to his head trembled and burnt as if he were suffering from an attack of ague fever.

Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed since he left them, and Margaret and Mrs. Fielding were sitting with their arms round each other's waist, when a loud crashing report rang through the house.

"That is in the Laird's study. Why will he clean his gun in-doors?" said Mrs. Fielding.

The sound had startled them both, and for a minute or more they sat silent and listening; the stillness seemed as unnatural as if the very air were listening as well as they. Margaret's heart panted rapidly. "Let us go and see what it was, mother," suggested she, bending her head towards the door.

"It is nothing, my love, but that the Laird has a fancy for cleaning his own favourite gun; and when he has not used it for some time, he will load it and fire out of the study window; we must beg him not to frighten us so," was Mrs. Fielding's reply.

Margaret had risen, still unsatisfied, when there came a rush

of feet up the stairs, and Jaques burst into the room screaming, "Oh ! ma'am, the Colonel's shot himself."

In a moment, as it seemed, they were down in the study, where a confused noise of many servants gathered round something on the floor, parted, and became silent as they entered. Old Elspie pushed her way in at the same instant, crying out, "Ye fules, gang for Mackaye. He's no deid ! he canna' be deid, I tell ye. Where's the Laird ? Ca' the Laird, some o' ye. It was the gun that brusten i' his hand."

Margaret was down upon the floor raising the gallant head upon her lap. "Elspie is right ; he is not dead, mother," said she, looking up from him for a moment, but in that moment she espied a rigid despairing face peering in at the doorway, and something higher than mortal charity gave her strength and courage to repeat, "He is not dead, Katie."

Nobody else spoke, because nobody believed her—if he were not dead, he lay like dead ; but she had thrust her warm little hand upon his heart and felt its feeble fluttering. It was a great faith and patience, a great faith, patience, and love that enabled her to sit there, holding his dear head upon her knees, adding to no one's grief—bearing her own in a prayerful silence. A helpless paralysis seemed to have fallen upon the poor mother, as she stood gazing at the prone form of her son with dull aching tearless eye, and wordless lips, while Cecy clung about her weeping, and Katie crouched at a distance, as if not daring to approach him whom she had so recently and bitterly insulted. There was a low dying wood fire upon the hearth, and a single candle to lighten this eerie scene, upon which came in suddenly the Laird—the messengers sent in search of him had missed him, and he entered without warning of what he was to see.

Every eye turned to him but Margaret's—hers seemed as if they would never again leave the white mask lying in her lap, over which old Elspie was bending with restoratives ; only they two would believe he was not dead.

"I tell you he'll come about only Mackaye gets here in time !" cried the nurse. "Leave him to me an' Sandy an' his brave young wife : let the Laird see him. He's no deid, master ?"

The old Laird knelt down beside his son ; he could feel no pulse of life ; he rose up trembling like a woman, and at the sight of his face the gentle weeping rose to a loud wail of

sorrow : only Margaret was silent ; always silent, always praying.

It seemed half a life-time before Mackaye arrived, but he came at last, and his first words were, "Clear the room ; I can do nothing with all these crying women about him. Of course, he is not dead."

CHAPTER XLVII.

COMMON SORROW.

THE Laird, Margaret, Elspie, and Sandy remained in the room while Mackaye made his examination. Nearly the whole charge of the burst gun and a splinter of wood had lodged in the Colonel's right side and arm ; the wounds were dangerous, might even be fatal, but Mackaye put his best face on the accident, and intimated that the profuse flow of blood, which caused the present prostration, would lessen the virulence of the fever which was always liable to supervene in such cases.

Margaret watched his lips dropping these oracular professional remarks, and though she could not catch his eye, which purposely avoided hers, she was not deceived—he meant that there was little to hope, but everything to fear.

The Laird understood differently, and rose at once from his despair to as sudden an exaltation of hope. "He will do very well in a few days, Mackaye ; we shall soon have him about again, eh ?" said he, clasping his white trembling hands, and looking eagerly at the surgeon's face and then at Margaret's.

Mackaye granted dubiously—"I hope so, but the Colonel will have a tough fight for it, even if he win ; and at present, I daren't promise you that he will. I am sure he won't if he is to be scared back into unconsciousness as soon as he comes to himself by that skirling of women outside the door : will you oblige me by removing it ?"

The Laird went out obediently, and led his wife and daughters away.

"And now, my dear young lady," insinuated the surgeon, regarding Margaret with real approval of her self-command, but anxious to relieve 'her from the strain and himself from

her presence ; " will you kindly go and see that all is in comfortable readiness in your husband's room by I have done with him ? No one, you know, can smooth his pillow like you, madam, and I am afraid it will be thorny enough for some time to come to tax all your skill."

Margaret was still on her knees supporting her husband's head, and she pleaded gently to remain, but Mackaye courteously but imperatively gave her his hand to rise, and after kissing the white unconscious lips she obeyed him.

" You would be in the way for the next half hour," said he ; " but I promise to let you in first. I am sure the Colonel would wish you to think of yourself as well as of him," and he closed the door upon her politely.

Margaret did not, however, stir from the outside of it, and she heard Mackaye say with great alacrity, " We'll turn the key, Elspie ; I'd rather see anything than crying wives and mothers—and here's work to be done that is almost more than a match for the doctor."

Mackaye was a clever, shrewd, harsh-featured, scientific surgeon, and where he saw danger, danger certainly was. He took off his coat to his work, and if some of his handling seemed cruel, as it would have seemed to non-professional understandings, there was all the more need of it. It was a sound most sweetly welcome to his ears when the Colonel groaned under the torture of probe and knife, and his wan eyelids flickered open with amazed stare on Mackaye's grim yellow face.

" The Lord's name be praised !" ejaculated Elspie, raising her hands devoutly.

" Muzzle him if he begins to talk, nurse. There's some one at that door again ! If it is his wife, let her in."

Margaret entered softly, a shadow could not have been more noiseless. The surgeon gave her a satisfactory nod, and permitted her to approach ; but at the same time he bade her observe that they must have " no feelings and emotions just at present." She bowed her head in acquiescence : for, having heard through the door nearly all that was passing within, she knew, as well as did Mackaye himself, that she could only call Rupert hers from hour to hour now, life hung tremulous upon so slight a thread—if the torn artery burst open again he was gone.

She met his faint eyes with a smile and a finger on her lips—perhaps to intimate silence, perhaps to check or hide their

quivering—and for the next few minutes Mackaye employed her in two or three little offices instead of Elspie to help her to keep her firmness up. The Colonel had been lifted upon the commodious study couch, and there he lay, wan with loss of blood, and his features drawn with pain: it was a sore trial to Margaret's strength to watch him and look calm. Mackaye was too wise to let her bear it long without some distraction, and he sent her away to the other women, intending to have the Colonel removed to his own room while she was absent.

She found them in the library, all weeping, all moaning, all looking for the worst; there was very little tenacity of hope in this family apparently, but her quiet entrance roused them into something like self restraint.

"Will he live? Will he live?" cried Katie, desperately; and she trailed herself on her knees to Margaret's feet, and clasping her in her arms besought her forgiveness with tears of anguish and remorse.

"Oh, I forgive you, Katie. If you have done or meant me any wrong, this is not a time to remember it," replied Margaret, releasing herself hastily.

Not a time for *her* to remember it, perhaps, but a time when it came home to the guilty mind with keenest torture.

She went to Mrs. Fielding, who lay upon a couch, half-lost to sense with her grief, and knelt down beside her and kissed her hand.

"Oh, save my son, save my son; my dear son, my only son!" she kept repeating.

"Don't cry so, mother; I believe God will save him for us; I do, indeed. I feel it in my heart, and that makes me strong;" the earnest faith with which Margaret spoke had its effect on all.

"You are a good woman, Margaret," said the Laird; "a dear, good, little woman; and I think God will save my boy, if it be only for yours and his mother's prayers. Geraldine, wife, be of better heart—while there's life there's hope!" and the old father's voice broke over this poor shred of comfort—the last and least.

Margaret looked round bewildered on all this noisy grief, and felt that it was growing infectious—her own eyes were blind with tears. This would not do. If she meant to be of any help she must be true to herself and keep her fears and pains under, and not let them get the mastery over her as they

were doing with all the rest. She began hastily to repeat Mackaye's more hopeful opinions.

"He will not certify anything, because the danger is great," said she, quickly. "He encourages us to hope; but you must give Rupert quite to me to nurse and watch for a time. He must not even speak, and Mackaye sees I can be quiet, and he will let me be with him."

"He is my son, let me go too—I *will* go! Why should I give him up to any one?" said Mrs. Fielding, with sudden jealousy.

She attempted to rise, but fell back fainting. This gave occupation to her daughters; and while they were busied about their mother, Margaret fled back to the study, unable to bear the scene any longer—swoons, hysterics, helpless prostration in sorrow were new to her experience, and would have thoroughly unnerved her if she had stayed to witness them any longer. Finding the study empty, she proceeded to her room, and discovered the Colonel there with Mackaye on guard. The surgeon having done all he could for his patient was attending now to his own comfort. He announced to Margaret that it was not his intention to leave the house that night; and this, while it gave her an assurance of safety, showed the view Mackaye himself took of the case, though he said everything to cheer her.

"I have made the Colonel understand that almost everything depends on himself for keeping quiet and calm," said he, "and I have him on my side. I can see he intends to live, as there he lies like a log, not moving an eyelash. Now, may I trust him to you while I just go and fortify the inner man? I'm sure you won't speak, or cry, or begin any nonsense: Elspie is close by in the dressing-room, if you call her."

No circumstances would Mackaye have considered strong enough to render his whiskey toddy a dangerous indulgence, so after seeing the Laird, and telling him all the favourable points of his patient's case, he betook himself to the house-keeper's room and there smoked his pipe, listening contemptuously to the efforts that were being made by the servants to get at the root of the accident.

"Explain it as ye will, ye can't explain it away, I'm thinking," said he, between two puffs; "accidents are accidents—and if this neat splinter had gone just a wee, wee bit further, it's Black Jeanie you might have had smoking her pipe here instead of me."

The surgeon had a little museum at home of which this splinter was destined to form another curiosity; and Black Jeanie was—everybody knew who Black Jeanie was—she always came in the wake of Death. Then the servants whispered about Margaret, and some of the women thought it strange she had not screamed like the rest, and said she bore it amazingly—they wondered how.

"She bears it as the blessed saints and martyrs bore their pains," gurgled Jaques, who was crying in a corner; "But I'm sure if he dies she won't be long after him. I knew some misfortune would come of the rainy marriage-day; they'll never see Mirkdale again either of them."

"They're not thinking of dying or anything so daft," growled Mackaye; "and for that pretty speech of yours I warn you not to come near your mistress to-night; d'ye hear? If you could look in at her now, I dare wager my haill fortune she is standing by him, holding his hand and smiling and purring over him as if he was a baby, although she knows that, at almost any minute, he might just shiver and look startled and give up the ghost—I'm not sure it won't be so yet; but he'll give himself a chance and she'll give him a chance too—the bravest little woman I've seen for many a day. Some of the sex weep in their hearts, and that's a bad disease to cure; but when it overflows naturally at their eyes, I have every hope for them that they'll get over it. Mistress Alison, a wee drop more of that nectar."

"She is a very grand young lady," observed the house-keeper, "but I like to show one feels myself—or else what is the use of feeling?"

Mackaye puffed his pipe in silence until it was puffed out, and then, with a promise to repeat the dose of steaming toddy before bed-time, he betook himself again to the presence of his patient. Margaret was occupied much as he supposed, but, in obedience to his orders, there had been no talking, and the Colonel looked half asleep or unconscious, being thoroughly exhausted.

"This is beautiful; Elspie herself is not a better nurse," said Mackaye: "and as you have proved yourself trustworthy, I shall leave him to you and the old woman for the fore part of the night and relieve you at ten o'clock, when you will have had as much watching as will be good for you. Keep the outer door locked, and let nobody in." And Mackaye, having admi-

nistered some reviving draught, retired into the adjoining dressing-room, where the combined influences of toddy and an easy chair and conscience soon lulled him into a quiet sleep.

The great house was very still after all the fright, hurry, and bustle had subsided—awfully still to Margaret as she sat by the bedside, her hand lying in her husband's nerveless clasp. Sometimes his eyes opened, looked at her without seeing her, and closed again, but hers never left his face: it had a deathly look in its cold pallor, with the black moustache lying over the mouth and the dark waved hair scattered on the pillow. She could not help thinking of the cruel things that might happen, if that wan eye never answered hers again; if that face only changed from its dull calm to the perfect calm of death; if that noble heart never revived to her love; if those passionate lips were for ever silent; if—all the ifs that beset every great uncertainty of human life and human love!

Elspie sat at the bedfoot, gently rocking herself and staring at the fire. She was old, and she had seen many die, young, and old, and middle-aged; but she was very sad for Rupert—she would have laid down her life for his; she did not like to see the ghastly visage, with the hue but not the repose of death, or the slight rise and fall of the bed-clothes above his broad chest; and she did not like to see the beautiful young wife smoothing the streaked locks from the damp brow or laying her lips upon the pallid hand, and so she kept her back to the tragedy, and thought of the old long ago when he was a bit of a boy, and rode on her back and tyrannized over her, and loved her as he would never love her again—loved her as if she were his mother, until she, too, fell asleep.

But Margaret watched on; it seemed as if she and silence and Death had the vigil to themselves. The storm of the day-time had gone down at dark, and the night was peaceful. The ticking of her watch upon the table was almost obtrusive in the hush. She heard nothing else but that for a long while, and then her husband spoke—a name was all he said, “Frances!” but Elspie roused up and came suddenly to Margaret’s side, and seeing her dilated eyes, she bade her not be afraid; “He’ll be light-headed at whites,” explained she; “they always are; but you must not heed what he says. What’s he saying now?—‘Frances!’ Aye, they mostlings run back to young times when they are in this strait. ‘Frances’—he’ll remember her oft; aye, aye, ‘Frances!’” and old Elspie sighed profoundly,

but Margaret only bowed her face down upon her husband's unconscious hand and prayed.

At the hour he had named old Mackaye came in from the dressing-room, where the Laird had been with him for two hours back, and he would not hear of allowing Margaret to watch all night, as she desired most earnestly to do.

"You must save yourself until you can really be of use to him," said the wily surgeon; "at present he does not know you from Elspie, but by-and-by he will be troublesome enough, and perhaps won't let you out of sight for five minutes in the twenty-four hours."

"Come with me, Margaret; let me take you to your mother and sisters," interposed the Laird, who had stealthily approached the bed; "you see he is sleeping—my poor boy, my poor boy!"

"Allow me," said Mackaye, and he gently guided Margaret to the door; "we cannot do with any excitement, it is dangerous;" and the Laird found himself with his daughter-in-law standing in the passage, with the door closed and locked behind them.

Jaques had been hovering about for some time in the hope that her mistress would come out, for she did not dare disobey the grim doctor's positive commands and seek her where he was, but as soon as she appeared she ran towards her, and essayed to pour forth her sympathy and condolences, which Elspie overhearing issued forth and suppressed them.

"Gang your ways, and tell Alison to brew Mackaye's night-cap, ye silly body, and send Sandy wi' it here," said she, angrily. And as Jaques departed, the old nurse opened the door of a room adjoining that in which the Colonel lay, and told Margaret that it had been prepared for her. "An' see, there's a door by the bed," added she, pointing to one of communication between the apartments; "I'll set that an inch ajar, an' I'll come in and whisper to you how he is through the night, wi'out Mackaye being ony the wiser. You're not a washy bairn, but a real brave woman, an' I'm not afraid of you burstin' in and frightenin' yourself for naught."

But before Margaret took possession of her new quarters, she accompanied the Laird to the drawing-room, where were Mrs. Fielding, Katie, and Cecy. They had cried themselves into an apathetic stupor apparently, and sat huddled near the fire silent and melancholy. The tea which had been brought

in an hour before stood untouched upon the table, and at the sight of it, Margaret remembered that she had tasted nothing since luncheon, and pouring out a cupful of the cold overdrawn beverage she drank it with avidity. Then she ate some bread, for the doctor's warning of the tax that would be laid upon her strength hereafter apprised her of the need and duty of maintaining it. Her example roused the others and they joined her; dinner had been sent away untasted, and to their natural anxiety and depression of mind was added the physical depression of faintness from lack of food. The needed refreshment rallied them, and they began to talk out the fears which had till then been weighing down their hearts in secret, and even from that sad talk a certain cheerfulness and hope were gradually developed.

"Has he spoken yet?" Katie asked, eagerly.

Margaret made answer that Mackaye had interdicted all talking: she could not bring her lips to repeat the one word he had uttered, it had smote her so sharply. When the tea-things were taken away the household came in to prayers—and a grave, holy calm for the time superseded the mournful sadness. When that decent religious rule was over, Margaret was eager to return upstairs. Mrs. Fielding had almost recovered her gentle self-suppression, and instead of letting Margaret say good-night to her, as she had done to Katie and Cecy, she would accompany her to her room.

"I must see him, I must see him before I sleep—I will be as still as I am now," pleaded she earnestly. Margaret prepared her as well as she could for the change in his face. "Ah, my love, I have looked on two of my dead sons, and he lives," was the reply.

Hearing footsteps, Elspie came out to them and listened to her mistress's desire, but prevailed on her to wait till the morning.

"He is in a sleep the now an' it may be life or death to him," said the old woman; "when he wakens up I'll call ye both; till then bide ye together here, an' try to sleep too; it'll comfort your hearts weel."

It was a cunning device of Elspie to leave them to each other's care; they lay down together, and talked, and watched the thin thread of light that slipped by the door until, as the long hours went on, kind nature's restorer came, and with heavy sleep nerved them to the morrow's patience and endurance.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CONVALESCENCE.

TO-MORROW became to-day, many to-morrows became to-day, and lapsed into yesterday and the for-ever-past, while Colonel Fielding still struggled at close grip with death. His young wife had every reason to remember the early time of her marriage as the saddest time in all her life; yet its trials and sufferings developed the reserved strength and loveliness of her character while they purified her heart. Through those tedious days and nights of lingering pain and fear, lightened but seldom by hope, her patient presence was a perpetual comfort. Her physical endurance astonished every one; sleep kept aloof from her, yet she never complained of weariness or showed herself unequal to whatever was required of her. As nurse and watcher, she had superseded every one; Mackaye gave her his entire confidence, and lauded her as if she were one of those noble matrons of former days, whose epitaphs history has written in letters of gold. To see how she maintained her quiet cheerfulness was a lesson; she had always a smile for Rupert, always a pleasant word for the worn-out, sorrowful group downstairs. Cecy once asked her how she supported herself so calmly, and Margaret, with a beautiful blush, told her—

"You know, Cecy," said she, "that I am going to have a little baby: I should not like to bring Rupert a cross, fretful son, and so I try to be always quiet and good. Elspie told me that he would take his temper from me, and I want it to be a fine one like his dear dear father's. And besides, love, I look to the bright side, and think of the day when Rupert will be restored. I think you are not hopeful enough."

It was hard for her to be hopeful, too, sometimes in the presence of her husband's alternate suffering and prostration; but whenever she felt her courage failing or her firmness giving way, she sought the renewal of them on her knees. Often in the quiet night the Colonel would wake out of his restless sleep to see her praying beside him. There were other wakings, too, besides these, when the fever burnt in his

veins and his tongue "babbled of green fields," and old visions of long ago revisited him in the night watches.

"Frances, Frances!" was the haunting voice of most of them. He was with her in Bransby wood—in the children's study—then he was in India, marching, fighting, retreating.

One evening, when Margaret was alone with him, the delirious fever ran very high, and his wild excitement was painful to witness.

"Remember you have promised me, Frances," he began; "if you break your promise I'll haunt you to your dying day," and he laughed, then dropped his voice; "My dear love, I shall haunt you whether or no, we can never change, sweet; when I am in India your spirit will come to me, mine will fly to you. How the sun burns! Frances is married, she has forgotten our love: no, I defy her to forget it; if I had any other wife but her should I forget her? Margaret is a child, she is very beautiful; but Frances was the love of my youth, the love of my youth! Let me creep into the shadow, and remember her. Frances, Frances, I want you; come to me, I am dying. How these cool palm-trees wave!—what a fiery torrent! Sandy, where is my rifle; I am going tiger-hunting with some fellows of ours. You won't come, you're a coward! See, he has sprung upon the horse's flank—they are down! That was a good shot and saved us. Frances, are you listening? Do you remember when I scratched your name and mine on the school-room window? You sent me the the ring back; yes, I keep it in my desk now with a lock of your hair. I scored out the names in Bransby Wood lest Margaret should see them; that child wanders everywhere. She is an innocent creature; and she is very fond of me; of course, I love her. We were never to marry, Frances: I thought she was like you; her eyes are deep blue, violet blue, sometimes when she is grieved they look black; her eyes remind me of yours; they are very pure and sweet; I love to watch them. She is very pleasant and refreshing to me; I shall make her happy. I could not give her up now for worlds. Katie hates her. Poor Margaret, come to me, my child, I love you best of all now; let me fold you in my heart, my beautiful, my love!"

And Margaret, who had shrunk behind the curtains, came out and bathed his forehead and moistened his parched lips; and stood by him holding his fevered left hand in hers until

the access of delirium passed and left him to white exhaustion and conscious pain.

But if the remembrance of Frances haunted his dreams, when he was himself, he only cared to have Margaret in sight: his father, his mother and sisters came to him by relays, but he always turned to Margaret with a keener look of satisfaction than greeted them.

"I suppose I talk wildly now and then," he said one day; "if I am very absurd, you must appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober, and not mind what I say in my fever. Elspie has lectured me for talking about Frances; I believe she has troubled me a good deal."

Margaret smiled. "You have told me many secrets, Rupert," replied she; "but I am not overburdened thereby; here is a letter that came to me from Frances three days ago. If you are silent and quiet, I will read it to you."

"Oh! yes, read it—" and he lay very still and breathless, watching her face intently. He thought it lovelier, dearer than ever, while Margaret slowly unfolded the full sheet of black-edged note paper and began as follows.

"MY DEAR MARGARET,

"I have heard of your trouble at Manselands with deep, deep sympathy; and I know your heart will not recoil from such poor expression of it as I can give. My prayers are with you day and night. May the merciful God preserve your husband to your love for many many years of happy life. There is nothing so cruel as parting with our dear ones; you, in the blossom of life, have not tasted this bitterness, and God spare you from it now. Katie writes to me in heavy depression. If you could spend one precious moment for me to tell me how he is I would be so thankful—for, Margaret, once I loved him, too; we were friends, and I have a faithful lingering affection left for him after the many years that we have been strangers. You will not grudge me this? In the generous plenitude of his love for you, perhaps he even yet recollects when he loved me. I have had many troubles, Margaret; you are young and beloved, I am worn down and alone; if it seems to you that I ought not to recal the past, pity me. I crave for a word from you of him. I am at Riverscourt with my mother, since it has pleased God to take my husband from me. This place recalls my girlhood; sometimes for half an hour I am

young again, but since Katie's letter my heart aches with cruel suspense. I see in my drives the workmen going on with the preparations at Abbeymeads for your reception. I thought to have had you already settled here; and I have pleased my imagination by picturing myself your friend, as well as your neighbour—you will let me be your friend, will you not?"

"Stay, Margaret, what was that? Read it over again," said the Colonel. In contemplating her sweet beauty, and revelling in the soft tones of her voice, he had lost the sense of what she was reading. She repeated the last few lines, and then ended and folded up the paper.

"Let me look at it, Margaret. Ah! the hand is changed—poor Frances! I feel better to-day, dearest, I am crawling back slowly to health. I have no more pain, only this terrible weakness. What says Mackaye?"

"He says he shall make you over to me again next week if you progress as you ought to do. Now, Rupert, it is time for your jelly."

That happy stage had arrived when the grim patient was always either eating or hungry: and how Margaret delighted to feed him and call him "Wolf." If it was not jelly time, it was time for chicken, or broth, or tea, or toast and water, or gruel, or sago, or some of the meek steps towards convalescence and strong meat. The Colonel was getting well.

"Did you answer Frances's letter?" asked he, following with his eye the retiring glass in Margaret's hand, as if he were longing to see it approach full instead of going away empty.

"Yes, of course I did; and I am going to write again to-day, when you are asleep. What are you watching the door for so anxiously?"

"I thought I heard Elspie coming along the passage with my chicken; you must not let Mackaye starve me."

Margaret laughed: "He says, I let you eat too much as it is, and you will have the fever again if I do; play at patience a little bit."

"I am very hungry!" was the pathetic reply. "How long have I lain here, Margaret? Sit down and talk to me."

"Seven and twenty days and seven and twenty nights—a weary while, my love, but soon you will be as well as ever again. What a skeleton hand! It is weaker than mine. Rupert, you have no idea what a grim ghost you look! Would you like to have a peep at yourself in the glass?"

"Am I so very frightful?"

"Very——" then fearing she had let her gladness run away with her into speaking what he might take unkindly, she added, "but I admire such an awful countenance, it is Jove-like! I am not disenchanted yet. Oh! Rupert, I am so happy again."

"I can see myself in your eyes—dear eyes! Margaret, I think you look pale; you have been shedding your roses over me. The sun is shining, it is a fine day; I command you to go out and gather some fresh ones. Here is Elspie and the chicken."

Margaret laughed at the fervour with which he greeted his dinner, and teased him as she cut it up, while Elspie stood by, and once or twice bade him not eat so fast. "Wait till you have had a fever burning up your strength, Elspie, and then talk." When the bones were being carried off he resigned himself to another interval of hunger, but he had not forgotten his commands to his wife. "Go out for an hour in the park," said he, "and bring back as much of the freshness and brightness of the day as you can—I will have my mother up while you are gone. Ah! impatient one, don't they all love you now?"

"Yes, Rupert, but we had to see you half killed first. Tell me how the accident happened, if you can. Do you remember?"

"Not distinctly: I saw the old gun lying on the table and took it up—and the next thing was Mackaye clawing me."

Margaret shuddered: "We won't talk about it—I have you safe again, Rupert."

"Do you know what my father said of you yesterday? He came in rubbing his hands as he always does when he is pleased, and cried out to my mother, 'Our bride is the best, the best and the bonniest!' He had been to see young Jem Erskine and his new wife, you know."

Margaret knew that Jem Erskine had married a girl who, in point of family and connexions, was all that could be desired. "The Laird has been very kind to me," said she, humbly, "I do think they all like me now, and I am glad of it."

"Like you: they regard you as an angel of goodness and strength. Go for your walk; I want to hear my mother praise you again."

Margaret looked out at the clear February sunshine, and as Mrs. Fielding arrived just at the moment she allowed herself to be prevailed on to leave her husband for the first time. Cecy joined her, and the Laird insisted on giving her his arm: the confinement to the house had done her no harm, and half an hour's fresh air brought back the bloom to her face.

When she went up to him again, the Colonel cried out with admiration and pleasure, "Come and sit by me that I may refresh my eyes with your beauty, my pretty Caprice!" And at hearing her pet name again she brightened more and more. Mrs. Fielding sat by the fire, and after a little whispering between her son and Margaret there was silence in the room. Presently Elspie came in with one of the convalescent's many refreshments, but he bade her put it down and hush—his wife had dropped her head upon the pillow near him and fallen asleep.

"It is the air, sweet lady! she has not slept an hour at a time all the while you've lain there, an' she must be deid for want o' natural rest," replied the old nurse: "foul fa' the hand that plants a thorn in her kind heart!"

Margaret never did anything by halves; so now, sleep having asserted itself, she slept without waking till far into the night. She had got Rupert's left hand clasped in hers and lying under her cheek, his right being still out of service, and when he gently tried to release it to help himself to more jelly or tea or sago, she held it the closer until he was obliged to decline the longed-for sustenance. Elspie saw how it was. "Come, don't be proud, open your mouth," said she, grinning; "this is not the first time I've fed you, and we must not wake that dear, blessed bairn."

The Colonel complied, and it was on the third repetition of this ridiculous scene that Margaret at last opened her eyes.

CHAPTER XLIX.

LAST DAYS AT MANSELANDS.

THE early days of Colonel Fielding's convalescence were marked first by the arrival from abroad of his sister, Geraldine,

and her husband Sir Alexander Stuart; and next by the marriage of Amy and Captain Knox, which had been deferred a week on account of his illness, but which could now be put off no longer, as Captain Knox's leave expired within the month. It was an occasion of double rejoicing, for on that day Colonel Fielding was allowed to rejoin his family circle for the first time since his accident; and the wedding itself was as different as possible from the scene that had taken place at Wildwood when Margaret and he were married so short a while before. All the kinsfolk on either side were assembled to do it honour, and in every respect it passed off as such an event should do. There was ardent affection and true esteem between Amy and her husband, and a perfect satisfaction and cordiality between the friends and relatives; but as nothing of human happiness ever yet lacked its flaw, there was a flaw here in the certainty that the two who were now uniting their fates for better, for worse, were to be parted for so many years from all but each other. This circumstance was not, however, suffered to intrude itself on the enjoyment of the guests less intimately concerned. The ceremony took place in the Manselands drawing-room towards evening, and after the bride had been kissed and blessed abundantly, and made over, at last, with not too many tears, to the safe keeping of Captain Knox, everybody else sat down to a state dinner, which was succeeded by a ball that afforded Margaret, though only an onlooker, far more pleasure than that which had celebrated her own arrival at her husband's home. She had him beside her safe who was so nearly lost, and her own claim to love and honour was gratefully acknowledged by those who had been the readiest to deny it. Mrs. Fielding regarded her with extreme tenderness, and Katie's haughty resentful pride and dislike had given place to respect and humble loving admiration.

"No one can resist my pretty Caprice," the Colonel used to say at this period, with pardonable and evident self-satisfaction. "We all conspire to crown her queen of hearts?"

One more public appearance Margaret was destined to make amongst her husband's kindred, and then to leave them. This appearance was at Rowanbank, when Phemie Blunte bestowed her warm heart, her mental vivacity, and her plain person on her cousin Jem Elliot. This marriage was celebrated ten days after Amy's, and then, Mackaye having pronounced the Colonel sound enough and strong enough to undertake the journey, he

proclaimed his intention of leaving Manselands the following week, stopping at Wildwood for a short rest, and then proceeding *home* to Abbeymeads.

This announcement raised a great outcry of expostulation in the family conclave. Mrs. Fielding remonstrated against Margaret's being carried off, just when they were all learning to love and value her as she deserved. Cecy said she could not do without her; the Laird protested that it was all nonsense; and Katie, who said nothing, felt as if, when Margaret went, all the frozen coldness she had thawed would gather around her again. But Colonel Fielding stood firm, and Margaret could not honestly plead against his decree. She longed to see her father again, for his frequent letters betrayed how lonely he was for the want of her; nearly four months had elapsed since she had left him—short months to her amidst all the excitement and anxiety that had filled them, but long, wearily long, to him in the dead time of the year with only Jacky and the dogs.

So the day was fixed for their departure, and old Elspie, the nurse, at her own request, was allowed to supersede Jaques, who, on her return to Mirkdale, was to resume her attendance on her old mistress, Mrs. Joan Clervaux. In the brief interval every one strove to do their utmost to show their affections for Margaret, and to efface the chill impression of the early part of her visit, but still it was with a conscious delight and happiness that one Thursday morning she bade them all adieu, and entered the carriage which was to bear her and her husband back to Wildwood 'ere the "morrow's night."

CHAPTER L.

AT WILDWOOD.

MARGARET might have been twenty years away from Wildwood instead of only a few months, the Colonel said, from the enthusiastic delight she manifested at the view of each familiar object as they approached it. Her impatience had made them start that morning earlier than they had designed, so that they arrived nearly an hour sooner than they had said they should

in the letter sent to announce their coming; but for all that, several miles from the Grange they met Sylvan Holt, mounted on Faustus and accompanied by Oscar, riding out to meet them on the road. Oscar set up such an ecstatic bark of welcome at the sight of his dear young mistress's face looking forth from the carriage window, that he quite overpowered whatever the others had to say, and all the way home his spirits were so fluctuating, that he was like a dog going out of his wits. Sylvan Holt's grey face looked older, paler, greyer than when his daughter left him, but he had made an effort to spruce himself up for her reception, and she scarcely observed it in his evident satisfaction. "Dear, old father," said she, smiling brightly; "we are glad to see each other again; are we not?"

It was March, verging to April, and the Mirkdale lanes had many a peck of dust, "worth a king's ransom," lying upon them, for the first idle wind that came that way to whirl and eddy about. But this afternoon it was still; the sky was blue, the hedges had the purple sheen that precedes the bursting of the buds, and the sun was shining on the slopes of Litton Fell and Fernbro'.

"Bonnie Mirkdale. Ah! Rupert, there is no place yet so bonnie as Mirkdale!" said Margaret, tracing the scene over with loving eye.

Going through Beckford, Tibbie Ryder issued forth from the cottage door and dropped them a curtesy; Miss Bell Rowley, who was returning from her ride, kissed her hand and looked after them curiously; Mrs. Joan Clervaux was at Oakfield gate; Mrs. Sinclair was on the look-out at Mill Cottage—everyone seemed ready to welcome her back; as ready to welcome her as she was to come. At last, they whirled up to the Grange porch, and there was Jacky glowing in her red wedding gown and cap, waiting to take possession of her bairn. The servant was almost as exuberant as Oscar, and after expressing her feelings with an abandon of kisses, smiles, tears, and gasps, that astonished the more courtly Elspie, she cried, "Oh! bairn, bairn, you have not pined for us as we have pined for you!"

"I am sure, Jacky, you are not so selfish as to wish that I pined for you; are you?" said Margaret in a laughing tone of reproach.

"T' Colonel hasn't ta'en t' mischief out o' ye yet," rejoined Jacky. "Oh, bairn, I am so mazed wi' joy at getting you back, that I forget you're not a bairn any longer, but a real

married lady! but you'll forgive *puir auld Jacky*, I know," and, quite unable to control her feelings any longer, she rushed into the dairy, seated herself on an inverted milk-skeel, and with her apron thrown over her head, indulged in a good comfortable cry, greatly to the self-restrained *Elspie's* amazement.

Now that Oscar had his mistress in the hall, he seemed to understand that his sunshine was restored to him, and went to where still lay the *maud* and hat, as if intimating that he desired her to start off with him for a ramble immediately—which Margaret laughingly declined as she entered the dear old winter parlour. The familiar room had put on a new face. Jacky had induced her master to have workmen into the Grange, and they, under Mrs. Joan Clervaux's instructions, had elaborated several apartments, so that if Colonel Fielding and his wife were tempted to make Wildwood their home for a part of the year, which was desirable for Sylvan Holt's sake, neither they nor their servants would lack either comfort or convenience.

There was a crackling fire on the hearth and Margaret's beehive chair drawn up to it, and in a few minutes the same group was seated round the blaze, with Oscar in the midst, as had gathered there on the night before the wedding. Some of them could almost have fancied that they had never stirred since then; and yet what a real change there was amongst them! Sylvan Holt's satisfaction was quiet but intense; he repeated many, many times, how glad he was to see his daughter looking so bright and well; and said it did him good—more good than all Macmichal's prescriptions, from which unintentional slip of the tongue Margaret first learnt that her father had been ill in her absence. He had been very ill: but it was during the anxious time of Colonel Fielding's accident, and he had straitly charged Mrs. Joan Clervaux that she should not allude to his condition in her letters, for Margaret could not have come to him, and she had already weight enough of care on her mind, without having it added to by the knowledge of his then dangerous state. Jacky had been a faithful and assiduous nurse, and Macmichal had brought him through most skilfully, he now told her, and he had regained his normal health; but one intimation the doctor had given him, he chose to keep from her—namely, that he laboured under a disease of the heart which usually terminated life

suddenly; and the anxious expression of his countenance, and its livid tint, did not betray his secret to her, for she regarded them as the traces of the illness through which he had already passed.

The old winter parlour looked so pleasant and *natural* to Margaret that night, that she could almost have found it in her heart to wish they were going to stay there always, and to be quietly happy and united as they had been before her marriage, instead of journeying away to a strange home at Abbeymeads; but she did not say so, well knowing how little such rustic isolation would accord with the Colonel's tastes. But she was glad to hear her father propose that they should come to Wildwood for the shooting season every year, to which her husband acceded; and then she ventured to hope that he would summon courage to visit them at Abbeymeads. Sylvan Holt's mouth twitched nervously at this suggestion, but he said he would not pledge himself to anything; he had long since regarded himself as a fixture at Wildwood for the rest of his days.

On the following morning Mrs. Joan Clervaux came up to the Grange, eager for a sight of her favourite; and from her Margaret heard many touching particulars respecting her father. To herself he had never once named his loneliness, but Mrs. Joan told her that he had felt so lost for want of her that never a day had passed, while he was able to do it, that he had not found his way down to Oakfield on one plea or another—but chiefly that he might exhibit a letter or ask if Mrs. Joan had received one, or, failing that, to talk about her.

"The announcement of your coming rallied his health and spirits immediately," added the old lady; "you must prolong your visit now, come over as often as you can, and induce him to travel after you to Abbeymeads."

Margaret saw that Mrs. Joan had an anxiety about her father the root of which was a mystery to her, but her questions were gently evaded or set aside, and seeing him more cheerful than was habitual with him she did not allow it to dwell on her mind.

By that day's post Mrs. Joan had received a long letter from Martin Carew, which, before she left, she gave to Margaret to read. Martin said in it, with evident glee at his good luck, that his regiment was one of those ordered to the scene of the war in the north-west of India, and that at last he was going

to have a taste of actual service. Mrs. Joan was sanguine about him, and expressed it as her belief that he would do well and bravely. There were many kind messages to Margaret, of whose marriage he was ignorant at the time of writing, and his aunt secretly but devoutly wished that he might not hear of it until after the struggle he referred to was over; not that she feared it would damp his enthusiasm or unnerve his brave young arm, but she did think it would make him more rash and reckless in the presence of danger.

When this subject was dismissed, there was some allusion to the death of Mr. Grant Hamilton, and Mrs. Joan gathered from Margaret's observations, that Colonel Fielding's former attachment to his widow was no longer a secret to her. It did not require any great penetration on the old lady's part to discover either the uncordial reception her favourite had met with from some of the Manselands family, or the revolution which the common sorrow on her husband's account had afterwards wrought in their feeling towards her, and though, perhaps, a little touched in her pride, she could not be very sorry to find that no one had superseded her in Gipsy's affections.

Colonel Fielding had not meditated more than a week's stay at Wildwood at this season, but under Margaret's gentle prevailings the week grew into a fortnight, and the fortnight into three weeks, and three weeks to a month, and they were still there, and still disinclined to move—but at last he said, resolutely—

"Margaret, as soon as your birthday is past we go," and she made no further objection, for her father now seemed as well or better than she ever remembered to have known him.

So one brilliant May morning the travelling carriage came to the Grange door again; and while Jacky observed, with a woeful affronted air, that it seemed as if they had only just come and were glad to run away again, Sylvan Holt bade his daughter good bye, shook his son-in-law by the hand, and turned back once more to his solitary fireside; Oscar bounded away down the hill after the carriage, and being discovered at the end of the first stage, sitting meek and panting on the pavement in front of the Old Horn at Middlemoor, where they had stopped to change horses, Margaret was so touched by his affectionate fidelity that she would have him taken up to accompany her to Abbeymeads.

When Sylvan Holt sought him round the Grange at twilight

to come in and bear him company, Jacky told him how it was. "I saw him loupin' away after his mistress," said she; "it wasn't like he wad bide wi' us after she was gone. Eh! master, but it's dowly wi'out her, an' that Scotch dame has been an' left a lot o' her bits o' bukies abint—bukies she read in night an' morn. See, master, they'r fu' o' her marks. Here's t' Holy Bible—I suld like to get a read at it mysel', if I could. There's many a saying in it she had the mischief to shoot out at me, when I telt her she was a heretic, as the auld priest used to say you all was. She'd read out of it sometimes—Elspie was a scholard too—she read her Bible. Sal I leave it wi' you, master? She's been main fond o' writing upo' t' edges; I don't mind o' seeing her do it afore she was married; I wish I could mak' it all out." And Jacky turned the worn little purple volume up and down, and over and over, remarking that it had been "well thumbed i' some parts." Sylvan Holt took it from her hand, and read some of the marginal inscriptions which, from the dates attached, had been written while Colonel Fielding lay ill. Jacky seemed rather disappointed that he did not inform her what they were, but when he laid the volume aside and fell into an absent mood, she placed the others beside it and left him.

The night was long and he was alone, and presently he was fingering the old book which Margaret had used ever since she was a child: Mrs. Joan Clervaux had given it to her. He thought he would just see what were her favourite passages: it was like having her to talk to him. It was many a year, perhaps half his life, since he had opened a Bible on his own account, and he remembered very little about it. He had not entered a church since soon after Margaret was born; Mirkdale said he was an atheist. But he was not. He did believe in God, and Heaven and Hell, much as ninety-nine men out of every hundred believe, but he realized them no more than they; and along with all other decent plausibilities, he had put off the pretence of a religion which did not move any feeling of his being.

When he had looked at his daughter's notes and referred to certain passages indicated by chapter and verse, he put the book on the table, thinking that he would make a parcel of it and the others on the morrow, and send them after her to Abbeymeads; and having decided on this, he presently found himself looking it through again, and lighting on the 130th

Psalm, he read it from beginning to end. It was a revival of his memory: he remembered hearing that Psalm long years ago, when it had been read in the daily prayers at his father's house. Jacky came in again with supper, and he was still conning it over.

"If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Oh, Lord, who shall stand?" he said half-aloud; then looking up at Jacky, he added, "We will send Margaret her books: she will miss them, perhaps, as they are what she is used to."

"Nay, they're worth more to you than her," replied the servant; "keep 'em, master, an' read in 'em yourself; there's grand words in 'em. I mind of her reading out once—'Set thy house in order, for thou shalt die and not live!' maybe it was for a warning to me: I'm older than I was, an' you are too, master: keep 'em, I say," and the books were kept.

CHAPTER LI.

GOING HOME.

THERE must always be a charm to a young wife in the first going home to the house where her future life as mistress, wife, and mother, is to be henceforward cast. It is a new beginning of life, as it were, with new surroundings, new hopes, new friends, new interests, and new duties—with a new support and a new love, infinitely beautiful and infinitely precious, but, as yet, unproved by the wear and tear of years of daily use. Margaret was sorry to leave Wildwood and her beloved father, but she was glad to go *home* with her husband, who would there be altogether hers, and she altogether his; a feeling of perfect and undisputed possession which had never been quite realized at the Grange or at Manselands, but which came true when they were settled under their own roof.

Abbeymeads was a beautiful old place, situated in the midst of a richly cultivated, luxuriant country; and, as it had for several generations been the favourite residence of the wealthy Holt family, it lacked nothing of internal or external embellishment which taste could suggest or money command. During the many years that it had stood empty, Mr. Meddowes had

had the charge of it; and he, partly from pride in the place itself, and partly from a hope which he never quite abandoned, that Sylvan Holt would yet return to live there, had kept it in such perfect order, that when it was arranged for Margaret and Colonel Fielding to make it their residence, little besides engaging a staff of fit servants required to be done. Sylvan Holt relinquished all right in his own possessions from the day of his daughter's marriage, and insisted that she and her husband should enter upon the enjoyment of them as independently as if he were already dead. The sumptuous family plate was disinterred from the cellar of the Bank in the county town, where it had lain for security during sixteen years, the long empty stables were re-occupied, and a body of carefully chosen servants were sent from London by Mr. Meddowes, so that when Colonel Fielding and his young wife arrived they had only to take possession of a completely mounted establishment.

Margaret, not unnaturally, was at first rather shy of her new position and rather embarrassed in it, but very soon she was relieved of all care and trouble touching the administration of her household rule, by finding that, while she was nominally queen regnant, Mrs. Brookes, as prime minister or housekeeper, exercised the active sovereignty in detail over the extensive female department, while Sandford, the respectable middle-aged butler, swayed the household generally, and Elspie, by some mysterious superiority of mind and manner, elected herself as surveillant over them. In point of fact she was as free as at Wildwood, with Jacky sole arbitress of everything, but her personal luxuries were increased a hundred fold; and Margaret, as we have said before, being a true Sybarite at heart, revelled in the rich appliances of wealth and enjoyment with which she found herself environed.

Mayblossom was in a stall of the handsome stables, and next to her was a beautiful Spanish jennet, a gift to his wife from Colonel Fielding; there were four dappled grey horses for her carriage when she made state calls at a distance, and a pair of long-tailed cream-coloured ponies which she drove in an elegant, low phaeton, just large enough to contain herself and one other person. We mention these first, knowing that it was in her horses that Margaret's soul would chiefly delight, but there were other mighty changes to try the moral metal of Sylvan Holt's wild young daughter, and it is generally allowed that the test of prosperity is harder than that of adversity.

In place of the summer and winter parlours at the Grange, so simply and scantily furnished, and her old bedroom with its panelled walls and simple white draperies, she had suites of lofty large rooms decorated with every luxury of art and taste—pictures, sculpture, rare old china, embroidered curtains, and carpets so rich and soft that they deadened every footstep. The Colonel, who from his youth upwards had been accustomed to all these signs of wealth, and whom an interval of camp life had made utterly indifferent to them, was amused at the new development of her simplicity and rather surprised by it.

For a little while there seemed a danger that she might sink into the lapt softness, which suggested those proud words of selfish ease—"Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, eat, drink, and be merry!" She was fenced about with all that human heart could desire. Love, which was only not idolatry, luxury, beauty—everything which could minister to a keen taste for pleasure—a taste which came fresh to the banquet and brought the zest of youth, inexperience, and innocence. But the danger was not long—the hardihood of her training came to her rescue; nature is strong, but habit, in many cases, is stronger. For a few weeks she luxuriated in indolent enjoyment, no petted sultana could have been more pampered or indulged; whatever she wished to do she did; whatever she cared not to do was left undone. She received a few visitors, and made a few calls; she drove out with the Colonel, wrote frequent letters to her father, talked to Oscar, who was still and always first canine favourite, and dreamed through a vast number of romances. Perhaps many women of rank lead similar lives—it is their apparent mission to enjoy an indolent ease, and accordingly they accommodate themselves to it body, soul, and spirit. The Colonel evidently saw nothing strange enough in it to call for remonstrance; or if he did, he attributed it to a languor consequent on her state of health; he even approved her tranquil, beautiful calm, and the neighbouring gentry who called at Abbeymeads all gave verdicts in her favour, but remarked that while she was as lovely and fascinating as her mother she was quite as extravagant and magnificent in her personal expenditure—and this was very true.

But no outward shock was needed to call back her better self; the change came gradually from within, gradually and surely. She was, in fact, weary of her idleness, and rallied from it with quiet resolution. There was a small room with

crimson and oak furniture, and a bay window looking upon the flower garden; and a select choice of books of a soberer kind than she had recently read; she betook herself to this room daily, and actually studied like a school girl for three hours under her husband's direction. She had her easel and sketched; she went into the village and saw the poor people, and read to one or two who could not read themselves; and appeared often at the village school. The rector of Abbey-meads would have fallen in love with her if he had not been in love with his own old wife for forty years and more, she was so gentle and blushing when he gave her a few good words of encouragement and advice in her shy ministrations amongst the people. Dr. Unwin had had a vast family of boys to bring up on not too vast means, and the consequence was that he and the pleasant cheerful body his wife had to forego many luxuries in their age to which they seemed entitled. Mrs. Unwin could no longer trot about the large parish, as she used to do, and she had no carriage to take her to and fro, so it came to pass that she very frequently occupied the second seat in Margaret's pony phaeton, and a very happy day it was for Margaret when she gained such a companion and friend.

In one of their drives, chance guided them past Brightebanke—beautiful even in its wilderness state—and Mrs. Unwin, in answer to Margaret's question, told her what place it was; she had not seen it before, and after a short hesitation they left the carriage and went within the gates. No neglect could utterly spoil the natural advantages of the grounds; and their situation, facing southwards and sloping towards a broad river, accounted for the name given to the house, which was a spacious modern building of white stone. They went over it under the guidance of a deaf old woman, and saw the faded remains of costly furniture, pictures on the walls, books on the tables; and were told how strict orders had once been given her to touch nothing, and how she had touched nothing since that order was given, and how the carpets had rotted on the floor for want of shaking.

Mrs. Unwin knew the tragedy of Brightebanke, and she and Margaret talked of it as they drove away from the deserted house; and the Rector's old wife had several kind remembrances of the unhappy lady who had fled from it to tell her.

"She was generous, her passions were strong, but her heart was warm. She loved little children, and liked to be amongst mine," said Mrs. Unwin; "and I take into account her foreign

education ; she acted on impulse from first to last, never from principle ; indeed principle she had none, feeling guided her in great things and small. I always said she was much to be pitied. You know, my dear, that we may separate the sinner from the sin, and while hating the sin we may compassionate the sinner ; and when we have exhausted *our* plea for her, we may still hope that God is more pitiful than we, because he saw all the temptations. When she came first to Brightebanke I was much taken by her ; she was lavish, but not lavish only for herself. She set afoot many kind schemes for the poor people, and nobody ever pleaded for her charity in vain. Ah, yes ! there was much good in her—much good ! I remember one pet fancy of hers was to convert Brightebanke into a school for orphan children, and we had many a talk about it over your cradle, and by-and-by the melancholy end came and nothing more was to be done or said.”

In many conversations that Margaret afterwards had with the Rector's excellent old wife, she led her back to talk of the plan her mother had laid for the orphan school, and when it was developed clearly, an idea began to brood in her mind that she ought to carry out the design. She spoke of it to her husband, who encouraged her, and having consulted Meddowes, who about that time came over to Abbeymeads on business connected with the estate, she wrote to her father for permission to convert Brightebanke into an orphan house with the produce of certain farms adjacent for its support. Sylvan Holt gave his assent, and as Margaret was prompt and energetic where her mind was set on any work, before the golden days of July were over, the long deserted house and gardens were alive with voices of little children. It became one of her greatest pleasures to drive over with Mrs. Unwin, and to spend a long summer afternoon in the midst of them, and it was beautiful to see how all the young things loved her. The old Rector was more fascinated with her than ever, and the neighbourhood lauded her as a revival of Lady Bountiful.

But while busy with her morning studies and orphan-school, Margaret neglected none of the amenities of social life. The vicinity of Abbeymeads was a cheerful one. Two miles off was the retired country town of Naburn, a place overflowing with small gentry, who were very glad to dine out ; Riverscourt, the dilapidated residence of the Stanley family, was visible from the windows ; and Carlton Hall, Castle-Sandry, Brig-

neath, and several other gentlemen's seats, were within short drives. Every one called at Abbeymeads, and the usual order of dinners was exchanged, and Margaret fell quietly into her duties as a country lady at her country house. Colonel Fielding used to smile sometimes, and rally her upon the skilful way she had of reducing these duties to system, and gaining leisure from her acquaintance to bestow upon her friends.

Margaret was really developing into a very fine character, and her dignities sat upon her with as easy a grace as if she had been expressly trained to support them. The honest, frank kindliness of her girlish manner remained, but it was sustained now by a reposeful, calm self-possession. No one could be in her company and the Colonel's for a single day, without seeing and feeling that she was a happy creature, doubly blessed in her own and her husband's love. If Cecy had been with them she would still have found occasion to doubt whether their courting days were over, for Colonel Fielding remitted none of his tender deference towards his sweet wife, and she, more than ever, regarded him as a hero and born lord amongst men. They both won a sincere respect and liking from their neighbours whether rich or poor, and it was not more than their deserts. Old stories, which had been revived at their first coming to Abbeymeads, dropped back into oblivion, and there was a general opinion diffused that the Rupert Fieldings were a great accession to the society and agreeability of their part of the county. Manselands heard the report, and was not astonished. Margaret's charms, though tardily, were fully acknowledged amongst her husband's family now.

CHAPTER LII.

RIVERSCOURT.

MARGARET had a generous disposition, but she was by no means exempt from the thorny virtues of other good women; she had her skeleton closet like the best amongst them, and in this closet there hung a veiled picture of a beautiful woman—the woman who had been the love of her husband's youth.

She never passed the door of this closet without a thrill of disquietude, without a vague consciousness that there was life and motion in the figure, and that it might some day step down from its frame and pass before her calm, superior, triumphant. When she and Colonel Fielding came to Abbeymeads, Riverscourt was deserted, all the family being gone to the sea. Margaret had determined to make Mrs. Hamilton her friend, nevertheless she bore the news of her absence without disappointment—rather, indeed, with serene composure. In her drives to and fro she frequently passed the shut-up house, and always looked for signs of movement and habitation there with an unacknowledged anxiety. More than a month elapsed, and all that time the shutters of the lower rooms remained closed, and the blinds of the upper ones drawn down, but returning from Brightebanke one evening with Mrs. Unwin she perceived a change. The great gates stood open, and there were traces of carriage-wheels upon the gravel: the family had come home, and there was an old white-haired gentleman talking to the lodge-keeper whom her companion addressed as Mr. Stanley, making particular inquiries after his wife and Mrs. Hamilton, and wishing to know how they had all liked Eastbourne.

When Margaret had been introduced to her neighbour, who acknowledged her with a courtly old-fashioned bow, they drove on, and Mrs. Unwin began to explain that the Riverscourt people had long ceased to visit on account of their poverty, "But," added she, "I hope now they will begin to feel the pressure of their misfortunes less since Frances has returned to live with them, for she possesses a handsome income entirely at her own disposal, and she is such a good self-denying creature, that I am sure she will feel it a duty to devote herself to them as much as she did formerly."

From this evening day after day, for a fortnight, Margaret anticipated a visit from Mrs. Hamilton, but she never came; she went to the Rectory and elsewhere, but avoided Abbeymeads carefully. Both Colonel Fielding and his wife silently reflected on this, and at last the Colonel spoke: "Frances is at Riverscourt, Margaret: I think you should call upon her," said he. "Don't stand upon ceremony with each other; I want you to be friends." And accordingly Margaret went.

It was on a cloudy afternoon when there was no air stirring, and the thick foliaged trees stood up without rustling a leaf in the sultry July silence. Everything about the old mansion

bespoke the enforced neglect of want of means to keep it in order. The untrimmed shrubs encroached upon the garden paths, the fountain on the lawn was choked with weeds and played no more, the flowers grew and blossomed, indeed, but it was in a tangle matted by many a luxuriant self-sown bramble. In the midst of this desolation Margaret came suddenly upon Mrs. Hamilton, walking up and down a gravelled terrace by the side of a garden chair, in which her mother was being wheeled about by a man-servant. Their meeting was not without embarrassment for both; they coloured, looked diffidently at each other, and then followed up the handshake with a kiss, after which Mrs. Hamilton presented Margaret to her mother, who had watched the greeting jealously.

Poor Mrs. Stanley was not quite herself; she was broken by age and still more by trouble; and as is often the case with people in her condition, her mind, dull as to the present, and oblivious of the events of yesterday, still retained with tolerable distinctness those of years ago, of which she would often speak as then and there occurring.

"Mother, here is Rupert Fielding's wife," said Mrs. Hamilton, bending down and speaking very distinctly in the old lady's ear. "You remember Rupert Fielding?"

Mrs. Stanley nodded her head and looked inquisitively at Margaret for several minutes before she spoke. "I am glad to see you, my dear. Who did you say it was, Frances? Mrs. Sylvan Holt? I thought she was—"

Mrs. Hamilton eagerly stopped her. "No, mother, no!" cried she; "it is the young lady whom Rupert Fielding has married."

"Frances, don't break my heart—think of your brothers! You are selfish and wicked!" was the irrelevant and passionate answer. "Ah! I have indeed lived to learn how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child. You will see us all brought to beggary when you might save us. Oh! cruel, cruel!" and she began to whimper, while her daughter, pained both for herself and Margaret, endeavoured in vain to check her. "Yes, you can shed tears, Frances; but if you could weep a flood, would that help us? How can you be so unreasonable as to talk of your promise to Rupert Fielding when I have always said it was impossible you could ever marry? He is the youngest son of an immense family, and will never be able to help your brothers. Now Grant Hamil-

ton is rich and will do whatever is needed; and he is very fond of you, Frances. Don't be selfish and obstinate: pray, don't. You are a bad daughter, and a judgment will come upon you yet for your ingratitude. It will, Frances, it will! Perhaps even through him; he has been away two years and has given up caring about you: men all change. I believe he loves another woman now better than ever he loved you!"

It was strange and pitiful to hear the tremulous angry voice reciting these old complaints, and to see the pale wrinkled visage which ought to have had done with earthly passions working in such impotent grief and rage. Mrs. Hamilton's face burnt, and she entreated Margaret not to be heedful of her mother's wild manner, excusing it by the feebleness of disappointed old age. Margaret would fain have escaped and left them, but Mrs. Stanley had taken her by the hand, and when she attempted to withdraw it her grasp tightened, and she said to her, with tears in her dim eyes, "I am happy to see you looking so well, my dear; and I hope your child will be a better child to you than mine has been to me;" and with that she leaned back in her chair and lapsed into an indignant, sorrowful silence.

At the next turn of the terrace they saw Mr. Stanley coming towards them; she called him to join them, and said resentfully to her daughter, "You can go, Frances: I know you are weary of any little attendance on your poor mother; I shall learn to do without you by-and-by."

"No, my dear; no," remonstrated her husband, kindly; "there is a great change in Frances. There, there, don't fret."

"Come away, Margaret; she will forget it all when we are out of sight," Mrs. Hamilton whispered, eagerly. "My poor mother incessantly revives that miserable period of our lives. Indeed, indeed, it is most painful and trying to me. She had no pity. You have your phaeton waiting; will you drive me through some of the quiet lanes, that we may get a little peace?"

Margaret was glad to be gone. That glimpse of former persecutions troubled her much, but the view of Mrs. Hamilton's suffering excitement troubled her more. She seemed for a little while to have forgotten who Margaret was, and spoke rapidly of the severe trials and family displeasure she had undergone when she was a girl, on account of her unhappy attachment to one whom she could *never cease* to love, honour, and respect.

Margaret said no single word to check this outpouring. A wave of colour flushed over her face, and then a wave of shadow; her lips were closely compressed and her eyes looked straight before her; she at last conceived that this poor lady and she could never be friends in the true sense of that relation—there could be no full confidence between them. At the first pause, Margaret proposed that they should turn towards Brightebanke, and the orphan school suggested a new theme on which both eagerly fastened. "You see what my life is now, and from that you may faintly imagine what it has been ever since I was a girl but very little older than yourself," said Mrs. Hamilton, with a bitter smile. "I am not an old woman yet—I am not thirty—but I have outrun my fortune in hope long ago. Still I feel the want of a growing interest in life, and your orphans will supply it. I love little children, but it did not please God to give me any in my marriage, and I feel myself often lonely; I must be lonelier still as the years go on unless I gather around me new cares from without."

Margaret glanced at the beautiful face beside her, and noting the hollow eyes and transparent hectic bloom of the complexion, she could not help remembering with pity how Mrs. Joan Clervaux had once said, "Poor Frances! she does not look long for this world." Yet as Mrs. Hamilton talked restlessly on, she betrayed no suspicion, much less knowledge of her perilous state of health. She had not been strong for years, and a little pain or weakness more or less did not disquiet her. All her thoughts were of the future, and of the help she could be to those who stood in need of it. She spoke of her married brothers and their families, alluding to the time when they would be grown up, and would want a start in life which she might give them. She had made an end of living for herself, she said, but as her income would at her death revert to her husband's family, she wished to do what good she might in her lifetime.

On reaching Brightebanke they left the phaeton and walked over the gardens and the house, which was not yet quite completed, and coming to a pretty, secluded room, which looked down a slope of flowers to the river, Margaret said she intended to have it arranged for herself, that she might come and spend a few days amongst the children sometimes when the Colonel could spare her.

"When you are away in London or at Wildwood you must

lend it to me, and I will fill your place, shall I?" asked Mrs. Hamilton.

Margaret said she should be glad of such an auxiliary, and the room was at her service whenever she wished.

"There is one vast privilege in the Romanist system. I should, if I belonged to it, go and end my days in a nunnery," added Mrs. Hamilton. "I want rest—there would be rest, and consolation. If your orphan-house owned me for its patron, I would go and live like a second mother amongst the children. Should you ever come to be alone in the world what a holy retirement will it be for you."

"Such a retirement does not enter into my scheme of happiness," replied Margaret, gently. "I cannot imagine myself alone in the world."

"No; for life has not disappointed you. You possess everything that heart can desire."

"Do you know who originated the idea of my orphan-house? It was my poor mother."

"So Mrs. Unwin told me."

All this time neither Margaret nor her companion had breathed a word in allusion to the letters they had exchanged during Colonel Fielding's illness at Manselands, but when they were again in the phaeton and returning to Riverscourt, Mrs. Hamilton said—

"It was very kind in you to write to me, Margaret, when you were in such dreadful distress a little while ago. I ought not to have forced myself upon your attention, perhaps, but I felt sure you would not misunderstand me."

"No. If I had been in your place I am sure I should have felt the same," replied Margaret, with honest fervour; "I had a real pleasure in answering your letters, because Rupert was getting well when your first came."

"You did not tell him that I had written, Margaret?"

"Yes; he saw all your letters—why should he not? Mrs. Hamilton, I have such a perfect love for my husband, and such a perfect confidence in his true love for me, that I can have no reserves with him. I am very young, and I have had no experience in the world, as you well know, but I feel that it must be right and happier for our hearts to be always open to each other—there would be something cruel to me now if I were excluded from his thoughts. I knew of his early attachment to you before you wrote; it was made known to me in a very

painful way; then I remembered many things which took a new meaning, and I was angry and unreasonable. But when I came to myself, Rupert made me see that that former passion was at an end; and I felt how weak and wicked I was to mistrust the love he had solemnly pledged to me, and I only prayed to God that I might make him as faithful and tender a wife as you would have done if such had been your happy fate. If our places were reversed I hope you would feel as gently and pitifully for me as I do for you. I should like to keep you for our friend—we could have no truer one, I'm sure."

Margaret spoke with earnestness. For the moment she thought all and more than all she said; and Mrs. Hamilton began to perceive how a man who had suffered keen disappointment, and had been driven about the world for a dozen years, might come to repose himself on the young girl's innocent freshness, and, as his tenderness developed in her the noble qualities of womanhood, might learn at length passionately to love her to the obliteration of all that had gone before. There was a struggle in her mind for a moment; then she responded to Margaret that she would be her friend then and ever—Rupert's friend, too, if he would suffer her to be so.

"He will. Come to us at Abbeymeads whenever you like; come soon and come often!" said Margaret warmly; "I want you to love me."

They were now at the Riverscourt lodge-gate; Mrs. Hamilton therefore got out of the phaeton, promised an early visit to Abbeymeads, and took her leave. Margaret watched her slow, languid progress up the avenue for a minute, then touched the ponies with the whip, and drove on alone, saying to herself, "She loves Rupert still: she will always love him."

The wonder to her mind would have been if she had not, but Margaret felt less uneasy in thinking of her than she had done before, and the veiled picture in her secret closet looked dimmer, less captivating, less dangerous to her peace. She was almost ashamed that she could ever have feared it, and said she would never be so weak or foolish as to fear it any more—a wise resolve, if it had only been practicable.

CHAPTER LIII.

A MEETING.

TWICE Mrs. Hamilton went to Abbeymeads, and on both occasions she found Margaret alone; her visits were made purposely that it might be so; but the third time, while they were together in the study, Colonel Fielding came in with an open letter in his hand.

"News from Manselands, Margaret!" exclaimed he, and then perceiving a lady in heavy mourning seated by the open window with her face turned towards it, he stopped short in some confusion, and his countenance changed.

"Mrs. Hamilton, Rupert," said Margaret, and he came forward with an incoherent welcome to give her his hand. It might be the reflection of the green leaves overhanging the window which made them both look so pale as they stood for a moment face to face—or perhaps both their memories flew back to the last time when they had held each other's hands in the sorrow of parting. But whatever it was, Margaret saw it—not without a little pang, despite all her trustfulness.

"What is the news from Manselands?" she began to ask.

Colonel Fielding gave her the letter to read, and said his mother and Cecy were coming to pay them a few days' visit on their way southward to join Lady Stewart, who was going to spend the autumn in Germany with her husband and children.

"Then I shall not have your mother with me in September; I am so sorry!" exclaimed Margaret, flushing with disappointment.

"My darling, I am certain if you have the slightest wish for her she will gladly return to you: read the letter, and see what she says towards the end of it," replied the Colonel, and he seated himself beside her, pointing at certain passages with one hand while the other rested on her shoulder. When she had glanced along the lines, she looked smiling into his eyes which were watching her face. Mrs. Hamilton went away almost immediately, and carried with her the remembrance of the expression of love that had kindled in both their countenances as their eyes met.

"Rupert worships his beautiful girl-wife," thought she to herself; "and yet he felt an acute pang in our meeting."

Colonel Fielding had, indeed, felt an acute pang at their meeting—it was impossible that it should be otherwise; but he was relieved that it was come and gone, for it had been hanging over his head with a sort of vague terror ever since he had been at Abbeymeads. One day he had taken from his desk, with the intention of destroying them, her letters written to him in India, but on reading a few of them over, his heart failed him, so powerfully was he affected by their loving words, and they were once more locked up, out of sight, but not out of mind. When he observed that Mrs. Hamilton so timed her visits to Margaret as to avoid him, he seconded her by keeping out of the way; though conscious that it would be well to have that over which must inevitably happen sooner or later. Their meeting in the study was purely accidental; either would have evaded it had there been any means of doing so, yet both acknowledged that it had removed a secret weight from their minds now that it was past. A meeting so cold, so emotionless, after ten years of separation! Margaret felt how much must lie under that level surface; turbid memories, pains of love, pains of parting, dead hopes, dead passion, the waste of two young lives, hidden like the water weeds in winter under a slab of ice.

"Well, Rupert," said she, interrogatively, when Mrs. Hamilton's departure left them alone together. She did not look up into her husband's face, but watched the wavering sunshine on the carpet and played rather nervously with her wedding ring.

He made her no reply for a moment or two, and gradually raising her eyes she found that he was observing her. "What were you thinking about? There is some mystery hatching in this pretty head, I'm sure. You want to know how seeing Frances has affected me? I can't tell you: it has affected me a good deal though. I believe I'm glad it is over—I dreaded it—" There was some hurry and confusion in his manner. Margaret perceived very plainly that it *had* affected him a good deal, but she misinterpreted the *how*. Colonel Fielding was sensible of a chilling depression, such as might overtake one in stumbling suddenly on the grave of a friend whom one had thought still in the land of the living. He sat silent a considerable time, and then said, as if he had discovered the conclu-

sion of the matter, "Frances is so changed that if I had met her in a strange place, and without hearing her name, I am not sure that I should have known her. Frances, *my* Frances, has ceased to exist, but it is a sweet, good face still."

"Oh, yes, Rupert, it is a sweet good face, indeed; but tell me how she is changed?" and Margaret nestled her hand into his and pressed up against him, feeling happy she scarcely knew why. Was it because Frances had lost her beauty in Rupert's sight, and he showed no regret? Possibly it might—for into the hearts of good women certain small feelings will sometimes intrude. The Colonel knew what was going on in her thoughts as well as if they had been held before him in the shape of a printed book, and replied accordingly.

"How is she changed? She used to have a bloom as fine as yours, my pet," said he, caressing the smooth oval rose of his wife's cheek. "I cannot define how she is changed, but I know I do not behold her with the same eyes I used to do."

"I hope not!" cried Margaret, with her arch smile. "I should hate her if you did, and now I feel disposed to like her very much."

The Colonel fell into a muse for a little while, and when Margaret roused him out of it they reverted to the letter from Manselands; yet it was curious to observe how, over and over again, Mrs. Hamilton's name, or some allusion to her, would creep into the conversation, betraying how their thoughts still ran upon her, and how much importance both secretly attached to the meeting that had just taken place.

There was a softer, sadder feeling about it in Colonel Fielding's mind than he would quite have liked Margaret to suspect: it was not love; his wife absorbed his heart entirely, but it was the pale regretful shadow of it, which almost always hovers over the great passion of a man's youth. There was a dull oppression on him for the time in merely looking at the place where she had stood with her heavy mourning dress hanging in straight folds, and her worn white face turned towards him full of the plaintive reflection of all she had suffered; he wanted to get out of sight of certain obtrusive chapters of the past which memory insisted on forcing upon him, and he proposed to Margaret that they should go out in her flower-garden and finish the discussion of his mother's letter there.

This letter was full of kindnesses, such as at one time Mrs. Fielding would have thought it quite impossible she should ever

express towards her daughter-in-law. She was eager to see her again, and said she should send Cecy to her to learn a lesson or two from her useful courage and stability. The Laird and Katie begged to add messages of interest and affection, and Margaret could now feel, with as much certainty as pleasure, that all at Manselands had come to regard her as one of themselves. She anticipated the promised visit of Mrs. Fielding and Cecy with a real delight, especially when her husband assured her that it would be renewed later in the year if she desired it; and she did desire it vehemently.

"Katie stays at Manselands with the Laird until August, when they go to London—I hope they will come here on their way," said Margaret. "Katie and Mrs. Hamilton were great friends formerly; were they not?"

"Yes; a meeting between them would be strange indeed; they parted as merry girls, and one now seems as much altered as the other."

"Rupert, do you really think Mrs. Hamilton changed at heart? Katie seems frozen up, but it is not so with her."

"I daresay you are right; Frances never could freeze, for she has not taken her troubles resentfully like poor Katie, but still she is changed in another way. I imagine she has lost some of that firm gentleness of character out of which sprang the lively grace she once had, and which was very endearing in her. Margaret, what is the handsome blue flower in this border?"

"The gentian."

Several times in the course of their saunter, when the conversation slid back to Mrs. Hamilton, the Colonel suddenly broke off to another subject as he did now. They looked about for a little while amongst the plants, singling out some new ones of great beauty, then passed into the greenhouse, and through it into a small grassy court with a fountain playing in the midst. This fountain reminded Margaret of the silent one she had seen at Riverscourt, and she remarked what a pity it was to see that picturesque old place tumbling into ruin. "Have you seen it since we came here, Rupert?" she asked.

"Only from the high-road, but I perceive that it looks much as it did formerly—very neglected and forlorn," was his reply. "The Stanleys have been in embarrassed circumstances for years, but I believe nothing could prevail on the old people to leave it. I remember when they lost a great part of their income through a lawsuit, Frances endeavoured to persuade

them to let it and go into a smaller house, but Mrs. Stanley's pride could not stoop; she could not relinquish her position in the county, she said. Poor lady! her position soon relinquished her. Frances had, I fear, an unhappy life at home until she married Mr. Grant Hamilton."

"I am sure she had!" replied Margaret, recalling the scene that she had herself witnessed at Riverscourt.

"She told you so? It must have been bitter, indeed, if *her* lips have learnt to complain! By-the-by, Margaret, speaking of places tumbling into ruin reminds me of Rushfall. Meddowes proposes to let it, as we shall not go there ourselves to reside. It is a curious old place, and as you have never seen it, suppose we drive or ride over some day?"

"Very well, Rupert, but let us wait until Cecy comes, she will enjoy the excursion too. Mrs. Unwin was speaking of it as a favourite place for picnics the other evening. She told me of one a good many years ago when she first made your acquaintance; have you any recollection of it?"

"Yes, I think I have, Margaret."

It would be rather strange, Colonel Fielding, if you had not!

It was there that Frances Stanley and he met and fell in love; he an enthusiastic, poor lieutenant, and she a girlish beauty just emancipated from the school-room, but already the belle of her county. Colonel Fielding did not like to encounter Mrs. Unwin now, he stood in awe of her lively reminiscences. The old lady had been very kind and encouraging to him once upon a time, and many a pleasant hour had he spent in the Rectory parlour with his young love: he could be very grateful to her even yet, but under existing circumstances it would have been much pleasanter to his feelings if her conversation had not always had such a retrospective tendency.

CHAPTER LIV.

RUSHFALL.

AFTER their first encounter Colonel Fielding and Mrs. Hamilton no longer avoided each other as before, and they met very fre-

quently. It was a great pleasure to Frances to be with Margaret, whose cheerful tone of mind and genuine kindness were inexpressibly soothing and reviving to her enfeebled spirits; and Margaret, on her side, certainly seemed to enjoy her society far beyond that of any other person amongst her neighbours. Mrs. Hamilton had lived much in the world both at home and abroad; her mind was of fine strain and highly cultivated; her manner was one of captivating grace and gentleness: she was, indeed, a perfect specimen of those accomplished and elegant women of whom Colonel Fielding had once said to Margaret that they were the order of women he especially liked. No doubt, when he gave the conviction and expressed the opinion, Frances was the model in his memory from which he drew them both.

Perhaps Margaret, in her eagerness to avoid any possible appearance of jealousy or distrust, invited Mrs. Hamilton to Abbeymeads, and was elsewhere more frequently in her company than she would have been under any other circumstances.

Colonel Fielding, apart from any sentimental reminiscences, had a great pity for Frances; she still suited him in the finest core of his nature; he liked her conversation, and he liked to see that he could still bring back a smile to her lips and a glancing light to her eyes which reflected the sunshine of former days. He was never present but he must try to make her happy for the time; perhaps the pleasure was not so keen to him as it was to her, for he would say to Margaret, "Poor Frances leads a life so mournful that it is a Christian duty to win her from her solitude for half a day; we will be kind to her for pity's sake." And he was very kind to her.

Margaret proudly argued down the teasing feeling of annoyance that would often beset her as she sat silent while they were talking on subjects from which her ignorance or inexperience excluded her, and more frequently than ever did she regret her own narrow education and lost opportunities of improvement. Perhaps she was inclined to undervalue herself too humbly. Since her marriage she was greatly improved; and if she lacked the showy accomplishments of women in general, her range of mind and native intelligence went far beyond them. It was not likely that a girl brought up as she had been could have the diverse subjects of conversation which Mrs. Hamilton's wide experience had given her: in

fact, a girl of eighteen will always show to disadvantage beside a woman of thirty, granting their original powers to have been upon equality. Dr. and Mrs. Unwin, people of judgment, admired Margaret for her sound good sense, her strong natural integrity, and the facility with which she adapted herself to her new position. They perceived in her no want whatever, for it must be remembered, if she had not been polished according to the orthodox method, neither had she been vulgarized by indiscriminate mixture with inferior society. Her only intimates before her marriage having been her father, Mrs. Joan Clervaux, Martin Carew and Jacky, she had escaped, and happily escaped, that lowering tone of moral feeling which an unweeded intercourse with many companions might possibly have entailed upon her.

Sometimes her position was trying for a young creature of ardent affections at this period. She had no distrust of her husband, neither had she any distrust of Mrs. Hamilton; but often, often, an overwhelming sense of humiliation would creep over her when she had listened a long while to their entertaining and frequently deeply thought conversation. She was eclipsed, thrown into the shade. Colonel Fielding had made the grand tour when he was a young man; he had travelled in Italy, France, and Germany since his return from India, and each seemed to be familiar with every step of foreign ground that the other had traversed. Margaret would sometimes put in a little crumb of remark, culled from a book of travels; but it looked pale and vague, and did not mingle well with their more vivid personal recollections, and on one occasion when she did so the Colonel smiled encouragingly, and told her that by-and-by he would show her these places, people, ways, and customs, which it was so interesting to remember.

Neither he nor Mrs. Hamilton suspected for one moment what Margaret was feeling; and she, though she could not free herself of a vexed impression that her inferiority never showed itself so palpably as when Frances was there, was yet so ashamed of the jealous fancy that she did her utmost to conceal and overcome it.

When Mrs. Fielding and Cecy arrived at Abbeymeads, it seemed as if Mrs. Hamilton came more frequently than before. Mrs. Fielding had loved her dearly, she compassionated her sorrowful fate, and remembered with inextinguishable regret the past circumstances of her life: perhaps, even, a little of the

old resentful disappointment at Rupert's marriage returned, but, if so, she kept it cautiously hidden, and treated Margaret always with a most respectful and affectionate consideration. It excited no feeling of uneasiness in her mind to see Frances on such intimate terms with her son and daughter-in-law; indeed, she wrote to Katie, and said how glad she was that Margaret should have so desirable a friend, and remarked incidentally that Rupert seemed to have lost none of his former pleasure in her society. But Cecy conceived a prejudice against Mrs. Hamilton—the only one of her family who had done so. She was too young to have any clear remembrance of her fascinating influence in youth, and saw her only as she was now—a woman, weakly hovering like a moth round a light, within dangerous limits, and gaining an undue prominence in her brother's home. Cecy was animated by a strong spirit of partisanship which is always more or less unjust, and in proportion as she felt a warm enthusiastic love and admiration for Margaret, she resented Mrs. Hamilton's encroachments and Rupert's frank enjoyment of her society. Cecy was the only one who divined that Margaret was ever made uncomfortable thereby.

The excursion to Rushfall having been mentioned one evening when Mrs. Hamilton was dining at Abbeymeads, she asked to join it, and could not, of course, be denied, though she seemed but little fitted for any open air amusement. It was wonderful with what tenacity she held to such remnants of enjoyment as life had left for her, and on this occasion some of her youthful verve and spirit seemed to animate her failing frame. The four ladies drove in the open carriage, the Colonel riding on before, and on their arrival at the lodge they all got down to walk through the grounds, which for natural picturesqueness had no rival in the country. At first the Colonel gave his wife his arm to mount the slopes that led to the ancient house, which was built on the highest ground of the place, but presently Margaret observed Mrs. Hamilton's weakness, and asked him to assist her. Cecy eyed this procedure with great disfavour, which Margaret's pleasant cheerfulness did not lessen. Cecy would have had her show a different spirit. For a time the whole party kept together, inspecting the curious architecture of the house, but presently they separated, and after a long, amused examination of some hideous tapestry in one of the drawing-rooms, Margaret became aware that Colonel Fielding and Mrs. Hamilton had disappeared. Mrs. Fielding was

tired, and inclined to rest, so she remained seated on the terrace in front of the house with Margaret, and Cecy proclaimed that she was going in search of her brother and his companion.

"I hope Frances will not be so foolish as to attempt going up to the waterfall," said Mrs. Fielding; "I am sure it will overtask her strength."

"You had better stay with us, Cecy; the heat is very sultry," Margaret advised; "I shall not stir until we seek the carriage."

"But you have not seen half that there is to see yet! I wonder which way Rupert went. Surely if Frances can climb the hill to the fall I can. Won't you really go, Margaret?"

"No; I think not, Cecy."

Cecy, however, would not lose her pleasure, and she set off alone by the same route, as it happened, that Colonel Fielding and Mrs. Hamilton had taken. They were not far in advance of her, but she did not overtake them or try to do so; she was exceedingly offended, and revolved certain thoughts in her mind which threatened soon to have gathered force enough to overthrow her prudence, which was but a slight wall of defence against her feelings when they were roused. She reasoned that it would be much more dignified conduct in Mrs. Hamilton to come less to Abbeymeads, and that it was neither right nor reasonable that she should go on loving Rupert now that he was married. Cecy had no experience and very faint imaginings on the subject of love, but she had a clearly defined and healthy principle of what was proper and what was wrong in the present instance. "Mamma and Katie talk of Mrs. Hamilton's pure and noble character," said she to herself, "but I do not think it is either noble or pure to hurt Margaret as I know she does. Of course, Margaret knows that Rupert loves her and is proud of her, but she cannot like to be reminded almost every day that she was neither loved first nor best. I'm sure if I were she, I would speak out! she is too good by half. I believe Elspie has noticed something too, or why was she so emphatic against Mrs. Hamilton, whom she used to like, when Margaret looked ill last night. I don't think Rupert quite knows what he is about, or he would not talk to her so exclusively as he does."

While Cecy was nursing her righteous indignation, Colonel Fielding and Mrs. Hamilton, quite unconscious that they had

excited any such sentiment in her bosom, were calmly reviewing some of the land-marks of their youth from which the sunshine had faded utterly, never to rise upon them for evermore. They came to the spot where love had transfixed them—for theirs had been love at first sight; then to the mouldy temple with the river gods on guard where they had rested coming down from the fall and eaten peaches out of a little basket; Mrs. Hamilton asked her companion if he remembered it. Men, in general, are less given to dwelling on sentimental reminiscences than are women: and it is a curious fact to note that, while Colonel Fielding during their long separation had vividly and tenderly cherished the most trivial incidents of their courtship, now that he was brought again into continual intercourse with Frances, they grew dim, confused, less attractive to memory and imagination. She was still the woman he *had* loved, therefore to be held in most kind and courteous respect; but every day might have shown her more plainly that she was not the woman he loved *now*, and that her present seeking of him removed somewhat of the sanctity from her idea, though it could not lessen his outward consideration. When, therefore, she asked if he remembered the incident of the peaches he wished she had had more reticence; he would not of himself have recalled in words any of the passages of their love, and it irked him that she should do so. The very slight surprise and coldness of his reply were perceptible to Frances, she understood him intuitively; perhaps, she had never fully realized until that moment the possibility of his having ceased *quite* to love her. If she had not, she realized it then; and the certainty filled her eyes with tears. For a minute or two they flowed unobserved, but her silence made the Colonel look down at her face.

"Frances," said he, in a troubled tone;—"Frances, I don't like to see you weep: we should not have come here; let us return to Margaret; we left her in the hall."

"Yes, let us return to Margaret; I am very weak and foolish, Rupert, am I not?" At the first bend in the winding path they met Cecy, whose eye instantly detected the disturbed expression of her brother's face, and the traces of tears on Mrs. Hamilton's.

"I shall turn back with you; I'm tired," said she, abruptly. "Mamma and Margaret are sitting on the terrace." And they all returned together.

Either the force of her emotions or the sultry heat of the weather overcame poor Mrs. Hamilton just as they arrived in sight of the place where Margaret and Mrs. Fielding were resting, and she fainted away. Colonel Fielding felt her swaying back from his arm, caught her as she was falling, and carried her quickly within the shade of the hall, where the others gathered round her in alarm.

"She was far too weak for such an exertion as this," said Mrs. Fielding; "her countenance is deathly. Cecy, run and bring the housekeeper."

Restoratives were soon found, but it was a considerable time ere they had any effect, and when Mrs. Hamilton did at last open her eyes, consciousness seemed but half restored, for she did not know where she was. Colonel Fielding had gone to order the carriage to come up to the house, and he arrived with it just when she was able to sit up; after a short delay she was lifted into it, and they all returned to Abbeymeads. Margaret would have fain kept Mrs. Hamilton, but she preferred to be taken on at once to Riverscourt.

Instead of being touched with pity by this scene Cecy's indignation only burnt the more hotly.

She recollected what used to be the strain of comment upon Margaret and Frances at Manselands before the revolution took place, and fumed angrily over every demonstration of feeling. It was clear she could not hold much longer; and that very evening, being left alone for a little while with Margaret, her indiscretion had its way and she spoke. Margaret was so taken by surprise that she let her go on for a minute or two, until she had about half developed her sentiments; and then, recovering herself, stopped her with a rebuke so indignant that Cecy burst into tears. The very vehemence of the young wife's anger would have betrayed her own latent feelings to any one more experienced than Cecy, but she felt so utterly abashed and so ashamed of what she had done, that she could only clasp Margaret's hands and entreat her not to tell Rupert. Margaret's bosom heaved; her breath came and went fast; her cheek and eyes burnt; it was a long while before she would speak at all, and then it was passionately, excitedly.

"You have hurt me, Cecy; you have hurt me very much. I don't think *you* mean to make mischief between Rupert and me; though, if you were our bitterest enemy, you could not have insulted us more cruelly. Never to me or any other living

soul must you breathe such wicked suspicions again : I did not think *you* could have wounded me so !”

Cecy kissed her sister's hands, and said she would rather have bitten her tongue out than have injured her, so Margaret presently softened and forgave her. “Rupert is very good to me, dear,” said she ; “I can confide myself wholly to his love and honour. It is but natural that he should find a pleasure in conversing with Frances, who is accomplished and clever, and whom he once tenderly loved. I do not feel it unreasonable that she should possess his kindness still ; Cecy, she has it : let her retain it. But it is I who come nearer to him than any other in the world ; it is I, his wife, who am locked in his heart of hearts.” Margaret's voice sounded unsteady, though she lifted her head proudly and confidently. Cecy ceased her sobbing, and said she knew Rupert was not to blame, it was Frances.

“I will not hear another word, Cecy,” Margaret interrupted, decisively. “You are a jealous, warm-hearted, wrong-headed, dear, little goose, and I love you ; but I shall give up loving you if you grow suspicious.”

Margaret felt in her heart that Cecy was right, but she never could have acknowledged it ; she perceived intuitively that, where the influence of Frances was prejudicial to her happiness, she must live it down in silence ; a weak complaint, a jealous resentment, would not help her one whit, and might leave a sensation of soreness on every mind. It would be best for her to abide still in the strength of her own love, to go on in her simple straightforward way, trusting and trusted ; if the path was sometimes uneven, if a thorn sometimes pricked her to the bone, she would neither faint with weariness nor shriek for pain ; she would come to the smooth turf anon. She reached it soon ; she had it in the approval of conscience even then ; she was far happier than if she had given herself a prey to the demon jealousy.

As a consequence of her over fatigue and excitement at Rushfall, Mrs. Hamilton fell ill, and the seeds of consumption already sown in her constitution, began to develop rapidly. She sent frequently for Margaret to Riverscourt, and glad, most glad and thankful, did the young wife then feel that she had not suffered her irritation to find vent in reproaches. A few more months or weeks and this sorrowful woman's course would be run ; it would be needless cruelty to embitter its end by resenting the

love she had never been able to conquer—the love which had been at once the greatest bliss and the greatest torture of her life. Colonel Fielding saw her no more after the day at Rush-fall ; and he often suffered keenly from the remembrance of the cold look and word he had given her then ; he had no right to wound the heart he had won—which had never withdrawn itself from him. He wished he could efface it by some new kindness, but though he called at Riverscourt he could not be admitted. Margaret saw his trouble and held her peace, but Mrs. Fielding wrote to Katie—"Poor Frances is wasting away in slow decline ; there is an anxious heart for her at Abbeymeads ; her death, whenever it comes, will be a greater blow to Rupert than we any of us think."

CHAPTER LV.

MOTHER AND SON.

THERE were many visitors at Abbeymeads during the summer, but Sylvan Holt was not amongst them ; he could not be tempted out of his seclusion ; therefore, Colonel Fielding permitted Margaret to promise that she would go to Wildwood as soon after her baby was born as she was judged fit to travel. Mrs. Joan Clervaux had been with her favourite a month ; Miss Bell Rowley, who never rested until she got an invitation, had expatiated over the country on all Margaret's horses, during a fortnight, which was much more agreeable to herself than to her entertainers ; the Laird and Katie had spent a few days with them on their way to and from London ; and Mrs. Fielding, after a brief stay in Germany with Lady Stewart, had returned to be with her daughter-in-law during the time of her trial. Margaret herself felt its approach without any apprehension. She was mightily interested in the solemn preparations for her little son's arrival—no one supposed a *daughter* possible after Elspie had spoken against it ; and kept an even, cheerful temper to the last. September was begun—was half over ; the corn was reaped on the wide levels about Abbeymeads, and again the ashberries were red upon the trees ;

Wildwood, Oakfield, and Manselands, waited in anxious suspense for tidings, and in due time Margaret obliged them.

It was one brilliant autumn day when the Colonel, having walked his wife about her flower-garden for a little while, mounted his horse in the intention of galloping off some of his superfluous impatience; he had ridden far, and was within two miles of home on his return when all at once the Abbey Church bells rang out a famous peal. He put his horse to its speed; and, in an incredibly short space of time, was dashing through the park gates and up to the hall door, where Elspie, glowing with importance, was waiting to receive him.

"What is it, Elspie?" cried he, throwing himself from the saddle.

"What suld it be? The first born of a Fielding's *aye a lad bairn!*" was the lofty reply. "Come up-stairs—she's ready to receive a court o' folks! I never saw so brave a lady in my life afore, an' the babe's a prince!"

Colonel Fielding passed Elspie, bounding up the stairs four steps at a time, and was in the room hanging over his darling with love and pride long before the old nurse had finished her oration. Margaret's blushing roses were gone, but instead she showed him a wee blossom lying on her fair bosom which more than made amends for their loss.

"I am so happy, Rupert; kiss me—kiss him too; do you think him pretty?" whispered she; "are you glad, love?"

The Colonel praised her and it to her heart's desire; perhaps he thought his son rather wanting in the article of nose, but he would not have said so for the world, and he certainly did not see the striking resemblance to himself which Elspie pointed out; but that might be because baby's moustache was not yet grown; and as Margaret looked pleased to know that he had been exactly like it at the same period of his existence he was exceedingly gratified. Mrs. Fielding was seated by the fire writing despatches to the Laird and others; but Margaret herself had already dictated a few precious lines to her father.

"Where is Oscar? I should like to receive his congratulations and to present baby to him," said she; and though Elspie demurred to the demand as being quite without precedent, the Colonel brought the staghound in. Oscar's demeanour in-doors was always gentlemanlike and dignified; and when his mistress softly summoned him, he approached the bed, planted his fore-paws on the edge, and made a very steady and sagacious in-

spection of the baby; he was just about to express his approbation by licking the tiny face, when Margaret's hand put him aside, so he stalked over to the little cloud of lace and lawn that represented a cradle, and stretched himself beside it at a word from her like a second Gelert.

At his mother's instigation the Colonel was going to withdraw, when Margaret, with a woeful face, signed to him to stay a little longer, so he sat down and looked at her, for whenever they began to talk Elspie said, "Hush!" so imperatively that they were both daunted. At last the old nurse despotically cleared the room of every one but herself, the baby, and the young mother, whom she commanded to go to sleep, purposely darkening the windows that she might have no excuse for disobedience. But Margaret did not go to sleep; she lay listening to the merry church bells, and stroking the baby's cheek with her forefinger as she whispered that they were making all that music in his honour. All at once, when Elspie thought she had fallen into a quiet sleep, she turned her wide awake, dark blue eyes round to where she stood and asked—"Elspie, how long shall I have to lie here doing nothing?"

"You don't call it doing nothing when you have that bonnie wee babe to pet, I'm sure!" said the nurse indignantly.

"No; but it will be fun to dance him about on my hand: won't it? And to see him toddle from you to me on the carpet."

"There's a *pair* of blessed babes! You must not be impatient; it will be months and months before he will want to walk or dance either. I should not be surprised if we had you upon your sofa before the week is out; for you are a real wonder for a lady, but you must do as you are bid and not get restless, or that will keep you back. What will Doctor Savory say when he comes again if I tell him how naughty you are? Now, go to sleep this minute."

Elspie spoke as if she were addressing a fractious child; so Margaret confided a little laugh to baby, and shut her eyes as she was bid, but opened them again very quickly when she felt the child was being removed from her arms to be tucked up alone in that wonderful cot. She immediately protested against any such transference as unnatural to the last degree. "Why, he would think he was lost," she said, "and cry his little heart out."

Elspie threw up her hands in despair, muttering—"Oh! but

she is a wilful lady, and hard to manage. I thought she would be as meek as milk."

But Margaret was very far from it! She brooded jealously over her new possession, and annihilated Elspie's experience over and over again in the ensuing week by new theories of management of her own under which the baby throve remarkably well. She was never quite at ease except he was beside her; and the way in which she petted and worshipped him caused the stately old nurse to remark one day, in a tone of warning reproof—"You suld not make idols of bairns to displease the great God."

"I am sure God is not jealous of mother-love!" was Margaret's reply; and Elspie felt rebuked by its natural truth and wisdom.

At the week's end she was lying on a couch between the window and the fire, and received a visit from Mrs. Unwin, whose favourite element was the nursery, and who gave her volumes of advice which Margaret speedily forgot. The next day came poor Mrs. Hamilton, wan and shrunken, but eager to see Rupert's boy and Rupert's wife—thus she always spoke of them; the interest they possessed for *her* was that they belonged to *him*. Another afternoon, just after the little one had woke up and been put into her arms, the Colonel entered, and, after a little idle talk, he asked her with a significant smile, if she felt equal to a visitor.

"It is my father!" cried she, kindling; "Oh! bring him in! How glad I am!"

Sylvan Holt, who was waiting outside the door, immediately appeared. He was looking remarkably well and cheerful for him, and seeing her so bright—for the roses were beginning faintly to bloom again—he said that his impatience to have a glimpse of the baby was too much for him, so he had ridden Faustus over, and was going back on the morrow—to which announcement Margaret looked a decided negative. She had daily written him wonderful accounts of the boy's progress, which perhaps accounted for the trifling disappointment betrayed by the remark, "He has not begun to talk then yet?" To which she replied rather confusedly, "Oh! father, he is only ten days old!" for she was so much in earnest about the baby herself that she could not imagine a jest upon him. Jacky had sent her loving duty to both the bairns, Sylvan Holt said, and a special message about a grand cot which was all ready

and waiting for the reception of the son and heir. He had also brought a letter from Mrs. Joan Clervaux, and a humble request from Tibbie Ryder to be informed of the exact hour of the baby's birth—with a view Jacky, through whom the message came, supposed, of casting his horoscope.

"He's a child o' the sun, an' will ha' gude luck his life through," said Elspie, imagining in Tibbie a false prophetess who might perhaps foretell troubles, and wisely forestalling her. "There's a main o' difference between children o' the sun and children o' the moon."

Sylvan Holt was allowed to take his grandson in his arms and kiss him. Margaret's baby certainly had one finely developed trait of character which was of good promise: he rarely or never cried, and he did not lessen his reputation on this occasion, or when his father afterwards tickled his minute nose with his long moustache before restoring him to his mother.

"He is such a good wee thing!" said she proudly. "I always used to think that the objectionable part of babies was their fretting, but mine never frets; does he, Elspie?"

Elspie supported baby's character for stoicism when he was sleeping and being fed, but she added in a qualifying way that she was quite sure he would have a fine will and temper of his own by and by.

Margaret resented the insinuation: "To think of a darling only ten days old having a will or a temper at all!" cried she; so Elspie bade her observe what a grip his little fist took already of anything that came convenient; and Sylvan Holt's forefinger coming convenient at that moment, baby illustrated the nurse's position immediately by clutching it tight; "Just as his father used to do before him," she triumphantly exclaimed.

All the old baby tricks that have been since the peopling of the world began were new, beautiful, and original to Margaret, who kissed and blessed her darling as if he had done a feat that never baby did before, and that interlude of maternal enthusiasm over, she made her father sit down by her sofa and talk to her about Jacky, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux. It was so good of him, she thought, to have come so far to see her, but he must not leave her to-morrow—certainly he must not leave her to-morrow; she could not part with him so soon; he must be kind now he had come to stay at Abbeymeads until they could all travel back together to Wildwood.

But Sylvan Holt shook his head and told her the place weighed upon him like a nightmare, and he *must* get away in the morning if he meant to get away at all; and divining his meaning, she smothered her disappointment, and urged him no more.

The Colonel and Elspie presently going out of the room, they were left to themselves for a short time, during which Sylvan Holt produced the Bible and the other little books that his daughter had left behind at the Grange, and asked her if they had been forgotten.

Margaret coloured and laid her hand upon his softly. "Father, no; they were not forgotten. I thought you would find them when I was gone, and because you love me that you would read them, at first a little for my sake, and that afterwards you would read them for a better reason." Her voice trembled, and there was a glittering in her eyes, such as had not been seen there for many a long day. Her father took her hand, and stroked and kissed it fondly:

"You are a good girl, Maggie, and I ought to thank God for you more than I do. I will carry the books back for company," said he. "But you are reminding me of another of Jacky's many messages—you must not shed tears over an unweaned child."

"Oh! father, dear, I am much too happy to cry!" and the smile that broke over her face like sudden sunshine dispersed the unfallen tears.

The next morning, as soon as it was dawn, Sylvan Holt rode away from Abbeymeads. The night before he had told Margaret that he should prepare to receive her at Wildwood in a few weeks' time, but he took no farewell; and when she asked for him the next day, Elspie told her he was gone. The Colonel said afterwards that he had been in no part of the house except the room in which he slept and that where his daughter lay.

In a very little time more Margaret's roses were again in full blush, and her gay and gracious presence was enlivening the whole house. Then came Mrs. Joan Clervaux from Oakfield, the Laird and Katie from Manselands, and Cecy with the Stewarts from Germany, to assist at the christening of the heir. It was a great gala day at Abbeymeads. The church bells renewed their merry peals, the tenants and cotters were sumptuously feasted, and the orphans from Brightebanke, all in trim

new frocks and ribbons, formed a lane of flowers for the baby to go up in procession, and besides their other enjoyments were each permitted to kiss him afterwards as he lay sleeping in Elspie's lap. There was feasting at Manselands also; and even Jacky insisted on holding a tea-party at Wildwood similar to another that was taking place at Oakfield; and if good wishes would have macadamized the little fellow's path through life, or blessings floated him to Heaven, an easy pilgrimage was assured to him that day.

When this important occasion was past, and the guests were dispersed to their respective homes, Margaret took a week's breathing-time to enjoy rest in the sole presence of her husband and child before travelling northwards to Mirkdale. During this brief interval often and often did she thank God, who had given her so perfect and complete a life, and pray Him to lend her strength so to go through it, that her happiness might not be her temptation, and lead her to forget at whose hand she held it.

The day before that fixed for their journey to Wildwood, Margaret drove to Riverscourt to bid Mrs. Hamilton good-bye, and to show her the baby, whom she had only once seen; for her visit to Abbeymeads, while Margaret was still confined to her room, had brought on a relapse of her illness, and carried her almost to the brink of the grave. She was sitting up in her room looking pallid and shrunken, but always with the same painful beauty in her face. She took the child in her arms but was too weak to nurse him, and soon restored him to Elspie. She then began to speak of herself as again fast recovering, and said that she had been ordered to Nice for the winter, which would quite set her up—her favourite servant was going with her, but nobody else. Her mother would be better away from her, she thought, but her father would try to get over to see her. Katie Grant had offered herself, but she had declined to take her from home for such tedious pastime as nursing an invalid. She alluded to her certain return in the spring, remarking that Rupert's boy would be growing quite a tall fellow then, and in no one thought or word betraying any consciousness of her actual condition. Margaret spoke hopefully and cheerfully, too, but she felt neither—there was Death in the face before her, if Death ever casts his shadow of warning on any face that he is soon to seal his own. When Margaret rose to go away Mrs. Hamilton held her hand long, and parted with her reluctantly.

"Let me kiss the boy again—Margaret, teach Rupert's children to love me," were her last words as they separated—never more to meet on this side eternity!

Margaret went home inexpressibly saddened, and finding her husband alone in the study, she put her arms round his neck and told him. "Oh, Rupert, we shall never see poor Frances again! you must go and say good-bye to her."

When she explained her meaning further, he seemed sadly shocked and pained, and early on the morrow he went to Riverscourt, and tried to get admittance to Frances' presence; but a message was brought him to the effect that she was too weak to see any one, and he went away disappointed. Margaret was grieved, too, both for him and for her, especially when she saw what a restless and unsettling effect was produced upon his mind; she, however, hastened their start from home, and a couple of hours after his unsuccessful visit to Riverscourt, they were journeying fast on the great north road towards Mirkdale.

The Colonel was silent and preoccupied all the way, and Margaret refrained from breaking in upon his absorbed mood—she probably appreciated the conflict in his mind as something with which she must not intermeddle.

They did not arrive at Wildwood until quite dusk, and Jacky's greeting to Margaret as she descended from the carriage was highly characteristic: "I thowt we was never to see you ony mair!" cried she; "but you're come to stay noo; we sal na' be far letting you run awa' again in a hurry, I can tell you! Let me have hold o' t' bonnie bairn! Oh! but I'd much ado wi' myself to keep fra' coming to see you baith!"

Elsapie with dignified reluctance yielded her precious charge to Jacky's arms, who, detecting her doubts of her capability to hold him properly, announced with a hearty laugh; "I'm thinking I'll surprise you, Elspie; I can nurse in a real purpose-like way! Sal I tell you? I've been practising for t' last month on all t' weans i' Beckford! Oh! but I can toss a baby noo as weel as ony grandmother o' em all—as weel as I can toss a pancake!"

And with that she began to dandle the child in truly orthodox style, while he plunged one of his little fists at her hard face, as if its hue and polish excited his youthful fancy. Having got him fairly into her possession, she did not yield him up until he demanded his mother with importunity: and even then she stood by smiling all over, and so pervaded from

head to foot with ecstasy, that Margaret laughed and said she was gone baby-mad! Elspie happening to leave the room, Jacky, who regarded her by virtue of her office and quaint dress with more awe than she regarded anybody else, took the opportunity to plead her own cause confidentially with Margaret.

"Will you speak to your gran' Scottish dame to let me be oft i' t' nursery, my bairn, will you then?" said she, earnestly. "I've had Martha fra' Oakfield hired into t' kitchen, an' two other lasses, both o' them steady hands to work for t' house-maiding. Sandy'll wait at table, and though I sal ha' to look after 'em a' still, I sal ha' lots o' time upo' my hands; for t' wee, sweet baby; bless him, bless him!" and she dropped down on her knees to kiss the little parted lips that his mother turned towards her. "Alexander Sylvan you ca' him? It's a lang name for sic' a sma' thing, a vera lang name for sic' a sma' thing! But he'll grow up to it, and be as big as his father some day!"

"We call him Alick for short, Jacky. There, he puts out his arms; you may take him while Elspie dresses me for dinner. Here she comes to see you nurse him so cleverly. I dare say she will be often glad to hand him over to you; he is a solid weight for his age."

To see Jacky's sturdy figure in the red satinet gown prancing up and down the room with the child on her hand was a picture to stir the gravity of a judge; all her dignity of manner, all her crabbed repose of countenance were fled, her delight and enthusiasm had quite exalted her out of herself.

"He's the beautifullest bairn!" cried she, almost whistling the superlative; "an' how manfully he sits up, to be sure. His back's as stiff as my ain. Ane'd think t' Colonel had him at t' drill already. He'll be a rare soldier when he grows up." And then she broke into a song and a queer figure dance which she footed to the inspiriting tune with the agility of eighteen: occasionally flicking a thumb and third finger after the manner of castinets to mark the time distinctly. Alick seemed to approve most highly of this vigorous manifold exercise; and Elspie, without the smallest jealousy, remarked that that was how a child should be nursed. Indeed, Jacky showed herself so accomplished in the art that the old Scottish dame's professional views were quite satisfied, and after that first exhibition of skill she never made any difficulty about surrendering her charge whenever the other wished it—which was almost

always. Jacky now wore the red satinet gown *en permanence*, and while ordering the house with the success of a superior mind whose natural position it is to rule, she modestly kept herself as underling in the nursery for fear of offence.

This was the gala time of all Jacky's life. To describe her serene happiness one hour and her ecstasies of playfulness another is impossible: indeed, she could not herself have explained her feelings. Margaret's expression is the only one that approaches their exuberance;—she was “baby-mad.”

CHAPTER LVI.

THE STAG HUNT.

IN coming to Wildwood, Colonel Fielding and Margaret had agreed beforehand that they would live there as Sylvan Holt did; that is, as if they were quite out of the reach of society. As soon as their arrival was known, Mirkdale called upon them in due state and form, and the call was punctiliously returned; but when invitations showered upon them to dine at houses four, six, eight and even ten miles away, they were each and all declined. They did not intend to go out, neither did they intend to receive company, unless Mrs. Joan Clervaux and Bell Rowley came under that head. The former was always welcome, and the latter would not stay away; she preferred being anywhere rather than at home: home, she said, was so atrociously dull. Her mamma was always sewing; Fanny was always reading; the baby was always crying; and the school-room was always full of little brothers and sisters, who were always at lessons under an old governess who was always cross. Bell often declared that her life was become a burden to her, and she was glad to bestow its tedium on anybody new, let them be ever so unwilling to receive it. In fact, she longed to be married, and to have an establishment of her own as rich and luxurious as that at Abbeymeads; and sometimes she felt angry at the fate which had made her one of eleven children, instead of an only daughter and wealthy heiress like Margaret. Her sister Fanny was recently engaged to the comfortable young rector of Middle-

moor, and was soon to be married ; a state of things peculiarly aggravating to Bell, who wished the ancient practice, which prevailed in the country of Laban, of not giving the younger daughter in marriage until the elder was disposed of, could have been introduced into English families. Perhaps Fanny was rather more vain and fussy and alluded slyly to *green stockings* oftener than was amiable or pleasant to Bell's feelings ; but then she had had to smart so long under a sense of tyranny, that a small degree of triumph in her dignified circumstances might surely be pardoned her. She was unfeignedly glad to be married, not only because her mamma would be thus relieved from any more anxiety about the settlement in life of one of her nine daughters, but because she admired the Rector as a superior man, and contemplated her important position as his wife with a natural and inherent complacency which nothing could disturb or modify. She was not in love, neither was the Rector, but they were suitable to each other, both by character and training, and would make a very easy, self-satisfied, common-place couple.

Sylvan Holt had that season rented of Sir Thomas Rowley all his shooting, so that Colonel Fielding might not lack sport when he came to Wildwood, and they were therefore frequently out both on the moor and in the Holm covers.

Margaret was never now of their party ; she kept at home and grew quietly domestic or only went to meet them on their return from their excursions ; but she still rode frequently, and still in her heart longed sometimes for the old freedom of activity which was so natural to her. Mrs. Joan Clervaux rallied her good-humouredly on the subject, and predicted that when the hunting began they should see her out in the field as formerly, to which Margaret replied, " Oh, no ! Rupert would not like it. I know his prejudices about women now, and give in to them,"—as of course, all dutiful and loving wives do give in their taste to their husbands' pleasure. (?) Bell Rowley, who heard Margaret's meek acquiescence in the Colonel's prejudices, ridiculed her unmercifully, and vowed that when her time came (*i. e.*, to be married) she would have a clause inserted in the settlements to stipulate that she should hunt twice in the week, if such were her pleasure, and that a breach of the said clause should be just and sufficient ground for demanding a separate maintenance. Perhaps Bell's incautious way of promulgating her sentiments was a principal reason why no one had yet been

tempted to undertake her management in the conjugal state. Old Paley had thought of her for a little while, but she had destroyed her chance with the richest and stupidest of the Mirkdale commoners by railing at her mother in his hearing, and administering a box on the ear to her smallest sister for treading on her toes. Mr. Paley expressed his sentiments to the friend, whom he had previously consulted about her, rather plainly, and only when they were reported to her by a good-natured mutual acquaintance did Bell know what she had missed. She was very angry, but she only laughed; and some people said—on her authority—that she had *refused* Mr. Paley.

When Colonel Fielding and his wife came to the Grange, they found that Litton Castle, which had been deserted many years, was being put into order as a winter residence for its owner, and a few days later the Earl and Countess of Framlingham came down and took possession. Immediately after Sir Harry Trafford announced that he should have a stag hunt in the beginning of November, and three more in the course of the season. A stag hunt in Mirkdale was always an event of the greatest excitement. The entire population, with the exception of the bed-ridden and the infants in arms, made it their business to appear at the spot where the animal was to be turned down, and to pursue it on "shank's nag," if they had no better mount, until exhausted nature gave way; when they dropped upon stone-heaps and by hedge-sides to take breath, and to listen to the sweet cry of the hounds ringing fainter and fainter until it died into silence miles away; then they would return home, wearied, but full of the proud delusion that they had assisted at a stag hunt. Bell Rowley, as soon as she had tired everybody at Bransby by talking about it, set off in high glee to the Grange, where she anticipated conversationally every fact of horsemanship which it was possible or impossible she could perform on the occasion.

"And I hope you mean to show yourself in the field, too?" said she to Margaret, rather sternly. "You *must*, you know."

"No; I think not," was the rather hesitating reply, with a glance at the Colonel, who had been listening to Bell's rhapsodies.

"Yes, Margaret, you shall go. Why should you stay away, when you would enjoy it so much?" said he.

Margaret's countenance brightened exceedingly: "I should

enjoy it *very* much, if you would like me to be there; only I thought you wished me to give up all my wild sports now that I am a sedate matron," was the laughing answer.

"Give up your wild sports and destroy your health, Maggie," interposed Sylvan Holt; "that will never do! Macmichal was warning you against yielding to softness and indolence yesterday—I overheard him. He said you must keep up your hardy habits at Wildwood, whatever you do at Abbeymeads and elsewhere."

The Colonel gave in his adhesion to the same opinion without any symptom of reluctance or disapproval; perhaps his wife had converted him to the idea that a woman may be perfectly gentle and feminine, and yet like a wild, exciting gallop now and then.

"I shall obey with pleasure," cried Margaret, and she made her husband a little mock reverence, as a reminder of the lectures he used formerly to insinuate on the propriety or impropriety of her out-door amusements.

"No one can object to a stag-hunt on moral grounds—even mamma does not," said Bell, dogmatically. "The animal enjoys the run quite as much as we do, for he must have found out by this time—unless he is densely stupid—that the hounds are never allowed to touch him. He has been hunted half a dozen times already, and I can fancy him laughing at them as he goes away; can't you?"

"I never took that view of his feelings before, but it is such a pleasing one that I shall entertain it in future," said the Colonel, laughing.

"Oh, the creature reasons by analogy—not a doubt of it. Six times have I been caught and six times have I escaped scot free, that is his reflection—or might be—and so I dare say he is very glad to get a good stretch across the country. He is no more going to be killed than the boy who plays the hare in Hare and Hound is, and he knows it. Privately, I must confess, that so far as my feelings go, it takes some zest from the sport, but that can't be helped in these degenerate days."

Bell made a grimace of compassion for the modern weakness which shrank from the sight of blood; and then, recollecting how her mother had impressed upon her the necessity of always inquiring after the baby with an appearance of interest, whether she felt any or not, she suddenly asked:

"By-the-by, how is the little kid, colt, or whatever it is; has

he begun to walk yet?" and was evidently much relieved when Margaret, without proposing a personal introduction, replied that he was flourishing, but still in his nurse's arms.

"I'm glad to hear it, *very* glad to hear it," with almost too much emphasis for the occasion. "And what do you call him, pray?"

Bell had asked this question so often before that Margaret could not help laughing as she answered it—"Alexander Sylvan."

"I have a bad memory for names, but I like a double-barrelled one, and I think I shall remember his. You may give him a kiss from me—I don't know or care much about babies myself, but Fanny will come and nurse him for you the whole long day if you like. I must say good-bye now; we shall meet at the stag-hunt on Tuesday." And Bell departed, pluming herself highly on the very superior style in which she had acquitted herself of the domestic inquiries and congratulations.

The stag was to be turned down near Greyscaur at half-past twelve on the day of the hunt, and thither accordingly rode Sylvan Holt, Colonel Fielding, and Margaret, passing on the road a heterogeneous multitude of country folks mounted on ponies and donkeys of every degree of incapacity for going, mixed up with flocks of pedestrians. There were farmers on lumbering cart-horses or perched up in old-fashioned gigs; there was the hunting tailor on a raw-boned steed, the hunting tailor from Beckford, without whose pert nose and vociferous tongue no Mirkdale field was complete; there was Mr. Wilmot on a fiery chestnut going to deliver tracts, perhaps; Mr. Paley, chin in air, as usual, on a gigantic grey, which diminished his person by comparison, to the dimensions of Billy Button; Sir Thomas Rowley, stiff, tall, and dignified; old Blounte, straight of port, ruddy of countenance; Sir Harry Trafford, and a gay bevy of sporting ladies in every variety of hat and feather. After Sir Harry went a troop of huntsmen, grooms, and hounds. By and by, at a spanking trot, came along the old Earl of Framlingham; a grand, soldierly, grey-haired man, with a pointed beard, and a long drooping moustache; his wife, as fair and fragile as a wild wood anemone, but with a certain eager fire in her countenance, rode at one side of him, and his eight-year-old heir at the other. The Earl had served in India with Colonel Fielding, and a hearty recognition took place, after

which, their wives being introduced to each other, the two groups rode forward to Greyscaur together. Margaret looked wonderfully beautiful that day; there was not an eye in the field that did not seek her with strong admiration. It was not only her delicate bloom of face, or her perfect grace of form that attracted, but her spirited buoyant air and the quick lively sense of thorough enjoyment that animated her whole appearance. People who saw her that day remembered and quoted her years after as the most distinguished and truly noble-looking woman they had ever beheld.

The scene was as lively as a picture from an old book of sports, all movement, dash, and glitter; the day was clear and cold, without either sun or frost—a cheerful inspiring day, with shadows of cloud moving from the west, and a pleasant breeze which might rise before night into a strong wind. Mirkdale through all its degrees had come out in force, but Margaret, as well as many others, was surprised not to have seen amongst the crowd Miss Bell Rowley and her well known bay. Still greater was her astonishment when they came suddenly upon that enterprising young lady plodding along by the way side on her own natural supporters. It was very humiliating to Bell to be so caught; she had meant to reach Greyscaur in advance and to get into hiding in the brushwood before anybody else arrived there, but being defeated in her intentions she gallantly faced it out, and while accidentally walking into a furze-bush in her confusion, she exclaimed—

“I lamed my horse yesterday and have nothing to ride, you see, but I was determined not to miss the hunt for all that!” While she was extricating herself from the prickly bush, the whole field swept by, and she was left solitary upon the road ready to cry with mortification. She began to fear that after all her weary tramp from Bransby, she might be too late and miss the start; until at last it struck her that to go straight across the country would bring her sooner to an eligible post of observation than keeping to the high road. She fixed upon a little conical hill with a crest of fir-trees, and began to make straight towards it over a ploughed field, until she was brought to a check by a rudely built wall of loose stones. That was easily surmounted; then came another ploughed field up-hill, and a second wall; next a grass-field, a quick-set hedge—and a stoppage. Bell ground her teeth as she ran along this hedge looking for a gap; but gap there was none. She was obliged

to turn back into the next field, and found there a continuation of the insurmountable hedge with a five-barred gate padlocked. Twice the number of bars would not have daunted Bell; she was over the gate in a twinkling, and toiling through another ploughed field of very tenacious earth, which clogged her feet heavily. More walls, more gates, more quick-set hedges, and more retracing of steps brought her at last to the hill-top.

She looked eagerly round—there was not a soul in sight, not a hound, not a horse—nothing.

The blank prospect was discouraging enough to try the patience of a philosopher, and Bell, as we know, was no philosopher. Greyscaur was beyond her; the meet, most likely, was beyond it again, and the shoulder of the hill concealed it from her in her present position.

At last she espied a horseman riding hard along the road, and perceiving by the turn he took that her speculation was correct, she set forward once again; after more turnings, doublings, and difficulties than need be chronicled she gained a field, over the gate of which three women in short woollen bed-gowns were leaning: she hastened towards them, and was told that the stag had been turned down ten minutes since, but that it was still in sight.

This gate opened upon the highroad by which, if Bell had come, she would have arrived in time for the start; on the opposite side of it was a lovely, sloping, grass field in which were gathered hunters and hounds impatiently waiting until the animal had got well away. One of the women pointed in the direction it had taken, and Bell who was rather short-sighted, looked very hard at a black object some distance off and said, Oh yes, she saw it. But the woman, following the direction of her eye, exclaimed contemptuously, "Not yon! that's a bod's nest in a tree! Look more to the right, away by that stone fence—There, it's ower," and just at that identical moment, Bell perceived the stag diminished to the size of a crow, vault over the wall, and make for the Ferndikes. She exclaimed that there would be no sport, she was sure! the hounds would run in upon him in twenty minutes unless somebody headed him back, and she gave the three women, who had been stone-picking, an exciting account of the last time he was hunted, and then told them the deplorable reason why she was not again distinguishing herself as she had done on that occasion. They all pitied her very much, and while she was

smarting under their condolences, the hounds broke into full cry, and the field was all excited movement.

She saw Sylvan Holt on his magnificent black horse, Faustus, and the gallant old Earl of Framlingham, with Colonel Fielding behind him, ride straight at a fence and go over, while the young Countess, Margaret, the little boy, and all the other ladies, flashed by her at a gallop, making for a line of gates which a groom dashed forward before them to open.

"Ah!" said Bell, with a groan of anguish, "if I had been there I should have taken the fences like the men! I never rode for a gate in my life; I would not pretend to hunt at all, if I were not bolder than that. I can see the Countess is a timid rider, and I suppose Margaret modifies her daring to please the Colonel, for I have watched her on poor Crosspatch go over a fence like a bird—very weak and silly of her it is to give up what she does so admirably to gratify his whims."

Bell snorted dissatisfaction as in the excitement of the chase the gay troop passed her quite unobserved. She stood at the gate watching them; first the pale eager-eyed Countess with her son beside her dashed by, but Margaret in a moment took the lead, her glance kindling, her lips set, her cheek aflame, her hair flying loose, and a long scarlet feather waving down amongst it. She rode a beautiful horse that day, and as the Colonel's groom was with her, she went away in a direct line, and Bell soon had the satisfaction to see that she, at least, when she got into the spirit of the run, would not turn a step out of her way to avoid any obstacle; she lost sight of her at last, but not until she was riding alongside of Faustus and her father with the Colonel close behind.

The other ladies were for the most part, either indifferent riders or indifferently mounted; there was Lady Trafford, Johnny Blounte—a young lady of Bell's order, with a deep red complexion attributable to weather—and Miss Bleete, a prim, affected, elderly girl, who came out sometimes in a surprising—not to say improper—manner for her condition and time of life; and many other ladies, some of whom, Bell sarcastically said, did not look at all at home in their saddles. Even these were presently out of sight with a miscellaneous tag-rag and bob-tail, who followed patiently their shadow of a chase in a dogged spirit of perseverance worthy of a cause more likely to be successful. The three woollen bedgowns returned to their stone-picking, and Bell then found herself left one of an igno-

minious tribe of idle folk, who had nothing to do but walk home again.

The excitement over, fatigue began to assert itself; she was sure she had never felt so weary in her life, and how she was ever to get back to Bransby she really did not know. Her sorefootedness made her humble-minded for once, and seeing a spring-cart belonging to a miller from Bransby amongst the throng of vehicles wending slowly away from Greyscaur, she condescended to tell the driver that he might give her a lift home, which he obligingly did. And such was the triumphant end of Bell Rowley's stag hunt—a humiliating experience of which she was never found to boast.

Meantime the chase went gallantly on. Notwithstanding Bell's prediction to the contrary there was an excellent sport, and Margaret was one of the first in at the end of the run. The stag took refuge in an outhouse quite unhurt, the disappointed hounds were whipped off, and he was conveyed safely away in his covered van to furnish future sport, while the hunters dispersed their nearest way home talking in exhilarated tones of the capital run he had given them. Margaret said to the Colonel she would not have missed it for the world; and in the height of her sympathetic good spirits she remembered poor discomfited Bell, and wished they had known of her misfortune at Wildwood in time to lend her a horse. Then she began to speculate to herself upon the time when little Alick would gallop his pony beside her, and go out hunting as that pretty boy of the Countess of Framlingham's had that day done beside his mother. She had a beautiful vision in her mind of training him up to a hardy, brave man like his father, and yet keeping his gentleness and tenderness for ever fresh. She was so occupied with her fancies that she was uncommonly silent until they were close at home, when her husband, who had been conversing with Sylvan Holt, asked what she was thinking of.

"Our boy, God bless him," said she.

"And I dare say our boy is thinking of his mother, too, God bless her!" replied the Colonel, warmly.

They were now at the Grange, and he lifted her from her horse, telling her with a gentle flattery that had lost none of its charm for her, that she had been the queen of the day, as beautiful and spirited as Diana herself, only not so cold and severe.

CHAPTER LVII.

A FALSE STEP.

It is probable that most persons whose commerce with the world has been wide, have once or twice in their lifetime been thunderstruck by some extraordinary moral overthrow, which might well shake their confidence even in their own immaculate virtue and integrity. An individual who has passed from youth to middle age in the highest worldly honour and respectability, all at once gives his former course the lie by some one outrageous act, that wrecks his fortune and his future as utterly as if he had gone all his days in the crooked paths of wilful transgressions. This individual has come suddenly in view of his peculiar temptation, the only temptation that could stir him from his solid standing ground; the temptation, perhaps, bears its known penalty in its hand, but yet it wears a guise so lovely, it drags at his heart-strings with such a sweet persistence, that all the rest of the world seems as nothing to him—even the loss of his own soul seems as nothing. There is his desire! let him enjoy it to-day if he die for it to-morrow.

Or perhaps the temptation takes the face of an expediency, or of a duty, or of an appeal to some really holy and high sentiment, which yet may be wronged in the using, though it be ever so noble in itself. The first step taken to meet it, temptation lays aside its mask and stands revealed—a selfish deformity, handfasted to its weak victim, who, staring fascinated at the Gorgon-visage, dares not disclaim its company, but lets it lead him as it will down the encumbered path of evil consequences.

A perfect fever of longing to behold Frances Stanley again, took possession of Colonel Fielding soon after he and Margaret went to Wildwood. A letter had come to him from her at Nice to tell him she was dying. She did not ask his presence, but by the aching echo of old days within himself, he knew how she craved for it. The same yearning feeling came over him also; one more look at her dear face, one more farewell from her beloved lips, he must have, let the consequences be what they might. In this craving there was surely no great wrong: his

love for Frances was purified of passion long ago; it was not now a pleasant thought to him—nay, it was the most sorrowful thought he had; a father's tenderness for a sick child, the faithful affection of friend for friend, are not more blameless than the remembrance, made up of love, pity, and regret, which he had of Frances. The harm lay less in his desire to bid her farewell, to receive her last look of earthly kindness, than in the expedient he devised to obtain his desire. If he had told Margaret what he wished, openly and candidly, she would have bade him go, though she might have felt a cruel jealous pain in her own great love: still, knowing, as she did, what they had been to each other, she would have bade him go in all confidence; but he distrusted her noble heart, he turned coward, and deceived her: a weak, a wicked, a miserable deception for them both.

He had deferred hitherto taking any steps towards giving up his profession; but when his son was born both Margaret and his mother had been urgent with him to delay no longer; he had therefore proposed to himself to settle his wife and child at Wildwood with Sylvan Holt, and then to take a few days' run up to town on this necessary business: it now served him as a sufficient excuse, and alleging no other to his trusting wife, he left her. He made no stay in London, but passed straight through to Dover, crossed the channel, and travelled night and day to Nice, which he reached on the fourth morning after leaving Wildwood.

Not without some sharp twinges of remorse and worse than remorse was this journey made; in its hurry he could do nothing but think how he would write to Margaret and explain, sparing her feelings as much as possible. Then he remembered that he had left Frances's letter behind, and if she should chance to light upon it, she would learn that he had wilfully taken advantage of her confidence; and something suggested that she might resent it in a way he would not contemplate. Most ardently did he now wish that he had acted openly by her; but, in the meantime, every turn of the wheels brought him nearer to Frances, and once in her presence he forgot all but the dear love of his youth—alone, dying, with only a servant and strangers around her—surely Margaret, environed with so many joys, would spare him to her a little while. She received him with eager welcome; she knew he would come to her, she said; she knew Margaret had too great a heart to deny her

this last consolation; and he did not tell her how that Margaret was altogether ignorant of his proceedings.

Frances was now familiar with the cruel, tantalizing character of her complaint. Her physician, seeing her so confident, had deemed it his duty gently to represent that there was no recovery for her, and that every fluctuation brought her nearer to her death. It was in the midst of the softened thoughts caused by this announcement, that she had written to Colonel Fielding the touching letter which had brought him to her side. His arrival rallied her, and, in the excitement of their meeting, he could perceive no material change since he had seen her last. Her eyes were bright, her cheek was flushed—it was hard to believe that she was dying: harder still when he began to feel and see how her love for him survived the wreck of all besides. But the next morning she was pale and prostrate; he could not think of any other besides her; the end seemed almost come, and now he craved for a few more days of life, and she craved them too—oh God, how ardently! This longing to live seemed to give her the power; she suffered, but she breathed, and spoke, and looked like one who would hold death at bay. In his feverish anxiety for her, Colonel Fielding almost forgot Margaret during three or four days; he did not write to her; it was a week since he had left Wildwood, and it was now *too late*; she must have learnt where he was from others. “Too late!” those words of hopeless reproach had never before had to him so mournful a sound as they had now. “I would write to her and explain, but it is *too late*,” said he, and so he did nothing.

Meantime there were haunting fears moving stealthily in Wildwood Grange; terrible anxieties growing and ripening hourly. When three days had elapsed, and there came no letter to Margaret from her husband in London, she wrote to him, and waited the return of the post for his answer without much care; but when the fifth morning brought her nothing, she began to ask herself what could be the reason of his silence. Still her happy, unsuspecting temper staved off fear; she thought he had probably declined writing because he might return to her at any hour. Sylvan Holt, however, remarked his silence, and asked her if the Colonel was a dilatory correspondent.

Margaret said—“I should imagine not, but I have had small occasion to prove him yet, father. If there is no letter to-morrow morning, I shall expect to see him before night.”

But the morrow's post was also a blank, and the Colonel did not appear as his wife hoped he would; neither did the seventh morning bring her any tidings. In spite of herself she began to be uneasy and restless, and that day the mystery was explained. She went down to Oakfield to see Mrs. Joan Clervaux, and found her rather hurried like herself; Miss Bell Rowley was there, and her conversation often had a ruffling effect on the old lady's nerves. They had some desultory talk about the Litton Castle people, and presently Bell said abruptly—"I understand Colonel Fielding is gone abroad?"

"Oh! no; only to London on business—he is going to give up his commission," replied Margaret, striving not to show how startled she was.

"Humph!" snorted Bell, regarding her with a hard, derisive, inquisitorial eye. "Then it must have been his *double*."

"Margaret, the fact is, that Bell hears from her friends, the Barlows, who are at Nice, that Colonel Fielding arrived there last Thursday morning—I assure her it must be a mistake."

"Barlow says he spoke to him, and that the Colonel told him he had come to see a sick friend; now who can that be?" said Bell.

"Mrs. Hamilton," replied Margaret, quietly. She erected her head, but her colour changed, and her lip trembled; there was nowhere in the world a worse dissembler than Margaret. "She is in a dying state, and he is gone to take leave of her," added she.

"Well, when I am married I shall not let my husband go to attend the deathbeds of his old sweethearts without getting my permission first," cried Bell; "and I don't say that I should grant it if asked for. How did you enjoy the stag hunt? You had a finer run than I expected you would have from the start; I must manage better than to be dismounted when the next comes off. I am riding Fanny's pony to-day. I hear it pawing with impatience—'tis a fidgetty thing, but handsome. Come out, and see it."

Margaret allowed herself to be conducted to the avenue, where a groom was leading the pony about. Bell displayed her points, commented on Fanny's stinginess in not letting her ride it on the day of the hunt, and then mounted briskly. As she rode away, she called aloud to Margaret—"I hope you will get the Colonel safe back, but if I were you I should be very much disposed to give him his *congé* altogether. It was

very unhandsome conduct in him to deceive you about where he was going to."

The man-servant stared, and Margaret, half suffocated with her indignation, returned to the drawing-room. Mrs. Joan Clervaux met her disturbed look with anxiety; and remarked that Bell Rowley's intelligence was rarely to be depended upon for accuracy.

"I think she is probably correct now," replied Margaret, striving to be calm and speaking with a curious slowness. "If Rupert had been in London he must have received my letter, and would have answered it. No doubt on arriving there he heard that Frances was worse, and hurried away to see her. I cannot be surprised at it—he loved her. He will remember to write to me soon."

Mrs. Joan looked much dissatisfied. "He ought to have written at once; Bell Rowley is an atrocious mischievous gossip," said she. "I feel very angry with Colonel Fielding myself; he knows how little will give people food for talk in a place like Mirkdale. I hope you will write without delay. Gipsy; and beg him to return to Wildwood immediately."

Margaret's pride took fire at the idea of *begging* anything at Rupert's hands now. She perceived that Bell's communications to her old friend had been fuller than to herself, but she would not ask what they were. She felt a wretched straitening at her heart, and a vague overshadowing of impending misery, but still with an attempt to appear as if she were not wounded or hurt at all, she took leave and returned home. Arrived there, she nursed her baby for a long hour, and afterwards, having gained a real outward calm, she sought her father, and told him what she had learned at Oakfield. Sylvan Holt was incensed at the meddlesomeness of the idle gossips, but as to the *fact*, it was impossible, he said: Colonel Fielding was incapable of such foolish and cruel conduct! His daughter took little comfort from this suggestion; she knew what her father did not—that Rupert had loved Frances when they were both young, and that since his marriage his conduct had betrayed how profoundly that love had impenetrated his whole nature.

She had much to endure during the next two days. The post brought her nothing, and the silent indignation of Elspie and Jacky was hard to see and suppress. Bell Rowley and Tibbie Ryder combined had started a rumour which ran through Mirkdale like wildfire.

"Colonel Fielding," said this rumour, "had left his wife and gone abroad with another lady. He had ill-used her, they had quarrelled, they had separated, and she was come home again to her father—"

No matter that it bore a lie on the face of it; there are always hundreds of good people ready to believe an evil report, and there was no lack of believers in this.

One morning (Colonel Fielding had then been ten days absent from the Grange) Jacky found Mrs. Hamilton's letter, and carried it to the parlour where Sylvan Holt and his daughter were. Margaret instantly recognised the writing, and, by the post mark, knew that it had reached her husband just before he left her—that it had probably summoned him, and that he must have deliberately deceived her. She pressed her hand over her heart and turned deadly pale; she felt keenly, cruelly humiliated.

"I did not think he could have distrusted me so, but I will not read the letter," said she; and cast it upon the fire, where it shrivelled up in a moment.

"What is it, Margaret?" asked her father. "Good God, child! what is it?"

"'Tis a letter from Mrs. Hamilton to Rupert; when he went away he hid his intentions from us. Nice, not London, was his journey's end."

The half-slumbering savagery of Sylvan Holt's nature awoke again, and breathed out in bitter, scornful denunciations, which had no tendency to slack the fires of his daughter's wrath. For a little while she sat perfectly still and silent, but her young face darkened with the dark passions bred in her blood. She had received a cowardly secret stab, and though she might draw the mantle of her pride close over the wound, she could not hide the anguish of it from appearing in her countenance. A stern frozen determination crusted over the loving warmth of her heart, and when she spoke, at last, her few words were fierce and strong.

"I never desire to see his face again!" said she, hardly. "Never while I live, do I desire to see his face again!"

It was scarcely an hour after the discovery of the letter had been made that there appeared at the Grange, unannounced and unexpected, the Laird from Manselands, in a state of agitation almost inconceivable in a man of his natural placidity. He was going forward to Nice, he said; would Margaret accompany him?

Certainly she would *not*, was her reply. The Laird reasoned with her eagerly, remonstrated passionately; whether he was a judicious mediator is doubtful—some of his expressions certainly incensed Sylvan Holt more deeply against his son-in-law, and dyed Margaret's brow with a stain of crimson shame.

"If we are the world's talk, whose fault is it?" said she, hotly. "Rupert has *meanly, treacherously* deceived me. It appears that every one knew where he was gone except his wife, and I am left to learn it from common rumour. All the world could not have passed upon me the indignity that he has done!"

"He has been carried away by his feelings, but I am sure he meant to spare you pain," said the Laird.

"Spare me pain!" echoed Margaret, indignantly. "If he had trusted in me as I have trusted in him there need have been no pain. I should never have gainsaid his longing to be with Frances at the last. I have not *now* to learn that he loved her better than myself; I have not been so blind during the last few months, but that I have seen her influence to be greater than mine ever was or ever could be. But I was his *wife*, and I had faith in his *honour*. I never believed that he could make me the mark of idle gossiping tongues."

There was no faltering in her voice as she spoke, and the sparkle in her beautiful eyes denoted anger rather than sorrow.

"Rupert wrote to his mother to mediate between him and you: he feared that you would feel bitterly offended," said the Laird.

Margaret's lips parted as if she gasped for breath; she crushed her hands hard together.

"He knew me so little, he undervalued my love so poorly, as to suppose a mediator needful," thought she; "nay, but I have deceived myself all along—he cannot have any heart for me at all!" Then she rose up proudly, and exclaimed, "I repeat now what I said to my father when Mrs. Hamilton's letter betrayed to us Rupert's deliberate deception—*I never desire to see his face again!*" And with that she swept from the room and ran to her baby's cradle, where she wept herself ill and weary through half that miserable day.

The Laird was shocked and startled by her last words, and appealed to her father to call her back, saying that it was impossible he could carry such a message to his son; but Sylvan

Holt replied that he should uphold his daughter's decision—it was most just; Colonel Fielding had incurred reasonable indignation and contempt, and need not look for reconciliation through his mediation.

“But, Mr. Holt, let us regard this most distressing business as men of the world and not as romancists,” said the Laird, seriously. “Because idle rumour says so-and-so, we are not bound to believe it true. What, after all, is my son's crime?”

Sylvan Holt's swarthy face darkened as he replied—

“I do not *know* how far he has taxed his wife's forbearance, but I think too far for her to condone the wrong. What Margaret said a little while ago was a revelation to me. It seems she was aware of this old attachment, and had suffered from its visible revival of late. If I could have suspected that he would ever subject her to this base humiliation, I would have laid her in Beckford churchyard rather than have given her to him.”

“But, Mr. Holt, consider her infatuated fondness for my son,” pleaded the Laird. “Will she be happier in resenting her wrong than in forgiving it? Will you destroy or let her destroy the happiness of her whole life for a mere pique of pride?”

“A mere pique of pride!” repeated Sylvan Holt, with angry scorn! “is not her heart mortally wounded too? Do you suppose that her infatuated fondness, as you call it—her pure and faithful love, I should have said—will survive the discovery of her husband's treachery! I know my daughter's temper—she will not readily forgive a slight, with which the gossips have made free. He has degraded her in her own sight and in that of many others; let him leave her now to those whom she can trust—for him she cannot.”

The poor old Laird was overborne and cowed by the tone and fierce gesticulation of Sylvan Holt, whom he now saw for the first time; he felt as if there would be danger in any meeting between him and the Colonel for the present, and timidly repeated his anxious wish for Margaret to accompany him to Nice. “He will not return while Frances lives, but when she is gone, poor soul, why should resentment last?” he added, in a low and anxious tone; “Margaret might gain a permanent influence by her pardon now, but if she shows a suspicious and uncandid temper, if she refuses his explanations let her look to it! Rupert is proud and firm, too, and *he* never forgives. He is

capable of taking her at her word, and never letting her see his face again!"

"Is that a threat?" cried Sylvan Holt, facing round brusquely. "Is it your wish to carry Margaret into the presence of this sentimental dying lady, that she may see with her own eyes, and hear with her own ears, how little share she has in her husband's thoughts and love? She shall not go. No, Mr. Fielding, not even under the penalty you name! She is not of that insensible, phlegmatic stuff which can look on injustice tamely; it would have been wiser not to have employed a mediator. Sir, I can defend my daughter, and I will—Colonel Fielding shall find no friend in me. Let him keep away from Wildwood: I wish to God he had never come there!"

At the last words his stormy tones were lowered; Margaret's face, as he had seen it during the few recent days, wan with misery and vain hope, rose pallidly before his mind. It was poignant torture to him. How he had loved her, cared for her, petted her in her happiness, and now that sorrow was come he felt utterly powerless! The reflection seemed to drive him out of himself, and he gave way to one of those furious passions which used to sway him formerly. The Laird stood aghast until the outburst ceased, and then with a depressing sense of how completely his mission had failed, he took his departure and hurried away on his journey, with Sylvan Holt's words of violent menace ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER LVIII.

FRANCES.

AFTER Colonel Fielding had written to his mother, and before any reply could come, he had ample space for dismal forebodings and regrets, as he lingered hour after hour and day after day in Frances's company. He could not take refuge in a reckless indifference, though he had played so wantonly with the greatest stake he had in life. "If Margaret would not forgive him," was the perpetual suggestion of his conscience. How good, how worthy of all trust, had she been towards him

in this very matter in which he had sinned against her! He had put a slight upon her love and faith, against which he knew both her heart and her pride would indignantly rebel. Already he imagined her reproaches; already he began to prepare his defence. His defence against what? What would be his accusation? Then he thought of her pain and her love which he had set at nought, and felt with a vexed self-condemnation how vast was the love and how cruel would be the pain. He knew now that he had acted with a blind, infatuated folly, but through all the conflict in his mind he had to keep a quiet countenance for Frances's sake. For several days she had been gradually sinking, a few more lingering hours of weariness and weakness, and his mournful task would be over—her great suffering ended, his, perhaps, to begin. But on the morning when he expected a reply from Manselands, she revived, as it seemed miraculously, and began to speak of seeing the spring again with something that was almost hope.

"Rupert, you must go home to Margaret; I will not keep you away from her any longer," said she, cheerfully. "Tell her I shall come back yet to Riverscourt with a new lease of life to help her with her orphans at Brightebanke."

Colonel Fielding tried to put her off with an evasive answer, but he could not disguise the miserable anxiety of his countenance.

"Rupert, Rupert! don't tell me you are here without Margaret's knowledge!" cried she, with sudden wildness; then, reading the truth in his face, she sobbed, "Oh! what have I done? what have I done?" and hid her working features with her thin hands.

He did his utmost to soothe and comfort her, but she would only entreat him to leave her at once and return to his wife and child. He heard her with a sullenness arising out of his self-reproach, for she said in her passion, that he had done her a wrong, too—that he had cast a shadow upon her grave. Then she would write to Margaret herself, and beg forgiveness for her involuntary wrong; but her weak fingers could not guide the pen, and the task was never done. Great, burning tears rolled down her wan cheeks as she looked at him with a wistful tenderness of reproach, saying, "Oh! Rupert, these are the bitterest tears I have ever shed for you! How cruel have you been to yourself and your sweet young wife! Go, leave me! You have no right here: I wish I had died ere you came!"

Colonel Fielding did not stir; his brow was dark, his eye clouded, but he stood firm and spoke with infinite gentleness: "Frances, when your letter reached me I could think of nothing but our young days. I only remembered that you were ill and alone, and that once I loved you more than tongue can utter. If the last fortnight were to come over again, I would still do as I have done, no matter what I risked or lost—it was not the time to count the cost when you were dying amongst strangers!"

"Oh! Rupert, if you had known Margaret truly, you might have come to bid me farewell and have risked nothing! I will not sting you with rebukes, for my selfish weakness is the cause of all the wrong; but delay not another hour: the last, the only charity and kindness you can do me now, is to leave me and go home!" She stretched out her frail hand to bid him good-bye: but when he had folded it close in his he kept it there with a sorrowful determination.

"No, Frances; I shall stay," he replied; "by the love we once bore each other cease to urge me! If I were to leave you now I should carry the reproach of it to my grave; I cannot leave you. And I do no wrong to Margaret further than I have already done."

"Rupert, you shall *not* stay—the burden of your presence now is greater than I can bear!" exclaimed Frances, "O God! that I had died and made no sign!" For a few minutes she gave herself up to a paroxysm of emotion, then recovering herself she continued eagerly—

"Hurst wrote for my father and my brother Edward three days ago; when they come I shall not be alone; they may be here to-morrow, perhaps to-night, then you will go, will you not? Ah! Rupert, you may come to hate me for *this*!"

"Never, Frances, never!" cried he, passionately. "You are exhausting your strength: lie down, love, and rest."

"I shall never rest any more, Rupert, until I rest in my grave. What cruel fate has made me from first to last the bane of what I most love."

"Do not speak so—or you will leave me a legacy of remorse in the thought that I have made death bitterer to you than it need have been."

Frances covered her eyes: he *had* made death bitterer, but she could not let him see she felt it. A fainting languor came over her; she lay motionless with breathing scarcely perceptible. There was no more thought now of seeing another

spring; that bright flash of the morning was only the lighting up before death. Hurst, who had come into the room, and stood watching, noticed a change in her mistress's face, and gave the Colonel a sudden, meaning glance. He started and bent over her breathlessly, but said nothing. After a few minutes' silence Frances opened her eyes and sought his; "Rupert, am I dying? You are receding from my sight; come closer, closer!"

He dropped on his knees beside the couch; raised her head tenderly and kissed her. "Take courage, Frances," he whispered.

There was a hushed silence for full half-an-hour; then she spoke again, but with extreme difficulty. "I shall not live to see my father or Edward when they come. You will give them my love, Hurst, and my love to my mother—my poor mother; I might have had a happier life but for her. Rupert, are you near me?" Colonel Fielding could not speak; his head was bowed down; his face hidden; Hurst was crying audibly. "Rupert, I do not see you: lift up your face, love. Once we were all the world to each other, were we not. If I do wrong to remember it, God forgive me!" He raised his head, but tried to veil his eyes—he was weeping like a woman.

"It cannot be wrong to remember it, Frances; I have never, never ceased to love you!" said he.

"You love Margaret best now, but you will regret me a little, will you not! Oh! I am very selfish! what have I ever done you but harm? And you have deceived her for my sake; she will be angry and resentful. Oh! my love, my love."

"Forget it, Frances; she is generous and will forgive me."

"When I am dead you will go back to her; tell her I would not have had you come without her knowledge for years of life."

"I shall not need to screen your memory; she knows you; cease grieving."

It was a soft, sunshiny day, but Frances presently said it grew dark. "This is the beginning of the valley of the shadow of death, love," whispered she. "Are you clasping my hand, or are we already parted? I wish we could go through it together—I was always afraid of being alone, you know."

After a long pause she added, "I don't suffer, Rupert. I am glad yours should be the last mortal face I see, because I have ever loved it best. We were very happy, dearest; I tried once

to forget you, but my love was stronger than me; I am not sorry for it now. Oh! if I am doing wickedly in thinking of you more than others now, God will be merciful, who knows what I have suffered—*He* only.”

She did not loose her clasp of his hand, or remove her eyes from watching his face; she lay still, but he could see that a mist was clouding her vision, and presently she stretched herself out like a weary child falling asleep, and died without a groan, without a pang.

“She is gone!” said the servant, hushing her sobs; and drawing near, she reverently closed the filmy eyes.

Colonel Fielding rose—yet Frances did not seem to him dead, tears glittered still on her eyelashes, her mouth smiled sadly. “She cannot be dead!” said he hoarsely.

“Oh, yes, sir, she will never look up again; she is dead,” was the solemn weeping reply.

“Leave me with her a little while alone.”

The servant passively obeyed; she had known Colonel Fielding when he courted Frances Stanley, and she pitied him from her heart. Sitting in the adjoining room, she could overhear his voice entreating her dead mistress to speak to him again, followed by a sound of vehement sorrow. The old long ago and the present were come together again, and for a little while the interval between was blotted out—by-and-by he would be stung into vivid remembrance of that, but now the first love reasserted its dominion, and all else gave way to its power. Frances had died as she had lived—loving him wholly—and all the strength of his heart did her homage. If she had vanities, faults, and weaknesses, they had worn for him the guise of virtues, and his hand never unmasked them; all his life long he will remember her as a woman beyond all women faithful, tender, and true!

When he came forth from the room at last his countenance was grave and stern—he had wrenched himself away from the past with a passion of regret, he addressed himself to the future with anxiety and doubt. Hurst met him in the passage leading to his room, and told him that the Laird had arrived, but on learning what had happened he had returned to his inn, leaving a message for his son that he might see him in the morning,

CHAPTER LIX.

SEPARATION.

FRANCES was dead. There was nothing left of her for evermore but memories—memories which he had done his utmost to embitter. Such was Colonel Fielding's reflection all that live-long night. In the morning he went into her room again to look for the last time on the inanimate mould of what he had once passionately loved. He stayed there a long time, and would have stayed longer had not Hurst entered to tell him that Mr. Stanley and one of his sons had arrived and were coming up to look at their dead. He kissed the unyielding marble lips once more and left her—it is a hard fact to realize, the final loss of our beloved; what is there like this parting of death? what pang like that insufferable one which tells us that *ours* they are not any more? they are the grave's and Heaven's, but for our sorrow, our love, our aching, or our joy, their sympathy is over!

If he had ever had a tender thought for Frances living, he had a far tenderer one now that she was dead; her name was henceforth to him as the name of a saint! After that kiss—the first cold kiss she had ever given him—he was fain to go and hide himself for an hour or two, but having gained, at length, a decent composure, he hurried away to where the Laird had left word he should be staying.

Father and son met without any greater demonstration of feeling than was expressed by a long grasp of each other's hands; they were silent for several minutes, and then the Laird spoke, endeavouring carefully to avoid any softness or vehemence of tone or manner. He felt deeply for his son; he saw what he had suffered and was suffering.

"I have come to take you home—all is over here, and you can do no more. Your letter shocked us; your mother so much that she was not fit to leave Manselands; I, therefore, became your ambassador; I went to Wildwood and saw Margaret myself."

"And what did she say?" asked the Colonel, walking to and fro to conceal his agitation.

"Say! she said she never desired to see your face again! I

do not know whether she was most indignant or most miserable, and Sylvan Holt shares her anger; you will find him irreconcilable—he is the more unreasonable of the two. I had better give you a plain statement of your position. The whole country gossips about your coming abroad to poor Frances without your wife's knowledge, and her pride is up in arms against you. She said that for months she had known that your love for her was subordinate to your love for Frances, and your last deplorable act has touched her honour—she has lost faith in you. If you had but been candid with her all would have been well, for her instincts are generous—yes, very generous! She is an admirable woman, Rupert, but she feels your unkindness cruelly.”

“How did she look?”

“Like one who has not slept for many nights—pale, dejected, anxious; but when she spoke of you her eye was flame! Your hope must lie in the intense love she bears you. You have injured her, but women feel a luxury in forgiving—such women as Margaret especially. I saw her lip quiver when I said you had asked your mother to act as mediator. I felt it was another false move on your part—for it implied a want of confidence in her love. It was then that she flashed out with the words that she never desired to see your face again, and left me with her father. I begged to see her again, but Sylvan Holt refused.”

“How had she learnt where I was?”

“From common rumour, she said. But the morning I saw her a letter had been found from Frances to you—this betrayed that you had left Wildwood with another intention than that you alleged to Margaret and her father; they supposed you in London when in fact you were here. There was the grievance, there was the sting! Margaret qualified it as ‘a mean and treacherous deception.’”

“And so it was. I deserve that she should scorn me for it!” said the Colonel in a low voice.

“Now, Rupert, I come to another question; I scarcely dare ask it, for I know beforehand what the answer will be—but, have you taken the preliminary steps for disposing of your commission and leaving the service?”

“No.”

“That is what I dreaded! And now it is too late,” responded the Laird, with a groan.

His son stood still and looked at him anxiously.

"Why is it too late? There! I see it all! You need not tell me!" cried he, turning away.

"You will have to go back to India,—that is why it is too late, my dear lad! Affairs there are going sadly amiss, and officers at home on leave are required to rejoin their regiments without delay. Honour forbids that you should hold back. Oh! Rupert, what will your mother say when she hears of this? I shrink from telling her."

At this moment a servant opened the door and handed a letter to Colonel Fielding, who retired hastily to the window to read it, for he saw at a glance the Beckford post-mark and Sylvan Holt's handwriting. On opening the envelope, the following brief missive, enouncing in every line the contemptuous anger and strong self-control of the writer, met his eyes.

"Colonel Fielding will best consult his own honour, the peace of his humiliated wife, and the future of his son, by obeying the order that has been issued for officers on leave from their regiments in India to rejoin them without delay. Ten days from the present date, the 'Oriental' sails from Southampton. Sandy has already left Wildwood to meet Colonel Fielding in London; Elspie has gone home to Manselands. Colonel Fielding's wife and son will remain at the Grange, and Sylvan Holt, both for himself and his daughter, desires that no personal interview may be attempted. Mr. Meddowes is furnished with plenary powers to make any arrangements Colonel Fielding chooses to suggest as to correspondence, &c., &c."

This extraordinary document was signed with Sylvan Holt's name, and then followed Mr. Meddowes' address in London. There was not a word from Margaret, and yet Colonel Fielding felt that she had been by while it was written—suppressing all vehemence of reproach, and dictating the curt, dry sentences. He stood long after he had read it, twisting the paper about in his hands, and quite oblivious of his father's presence. A word of kindness, even a word of anger, so it had its root in love, would have moved him profoundly, but these cold, stiff phrases incited his spirit of opposition. When he, at length, turned to the Laird, there was a bitter contortion about his mouth, and his brows were angrily knit: "There is the key that solves all our difficulties," said he, offering the letter; and as his father read it he again paced the room with his head bent down and his teeth clenched.

He was in one of those moods when men from very anguish of self-reproach are ready to turn to the first way of release that opens itself to them, though that may be diametrically opposed to the one they would have chosen in a saner frame of mind. He was still sore with the death of Frances, still pitifully moved by her love and sorrow, and down upon his raw and writhing heart came this icy letter from Margaret: he felt vexed, indignant, mortified; she was hard and cold; he would never sue to such a woman—never!

As the Laird returned the paper into his hand, he asked him what he meant to do.

"There is but one thing to do. I shall see poor Frances laid in the ground, and then, hey for Marseilles! I'll take the Overland to India, and be with my regiment by Christmas." He tried to laugh, but it was a wretched failure, and he was fain to lean his forehead a minute or two against the window, and look at the broad sunny landscape, which, for anything he saw of it, might as well have been wrapped in a shroud of densest mist.

"But you will not go to India, Rupert, without seeing Margaret—without attempting a reconciliation? That would be madness!" cried the Laird.

"She dictated this letter, and I will obey her behests!" replied Colonel Fielding, coldly. "She has magnified my offence into an unpardonable crime; I will not beseech her forgiveness—not I! She repulses me with vehemence; I know the scorn and anger she is capable of. Women never forget: she will have stored up in her memory a thousand words and looks, which she will add to the sum of my iniquities. Was I to give her chapter and verse for all my movements?"

"Don't be unjust to her, Rupert; it is no trifling misunderstanding to her, be sure of that!" said the Laird, deprecatingly.

The Colonel was recalled to himself by that tone. "Poor Margaret!" exclaimed he. "I love her, father; she has reason to think I do not, but I could not be near her daily, feeling all her purity, goodness, and loveliness, without rendering her the homage of my whole soul! It was a strange yearning of pity impelled me here; it was not that I loved Frances better than her—God knows I did not! Tell me again how she looked."

"I pitied her, Rupert. She looked as she used to look at Manselands last winter when you were ill, and Mackaye did not

give her hopeful account of your progress. She looked miserable, distressed, heart-broken. It is humbling to a proud sensitive woman to be made the talk and compassion of gossiping fools—to have it said that her husband has deserted her—and she with no answer ready! She exclaimed, but too justly, that all the world could not have put on her the indignity that you have done.”

Colonel Fielding responded gravely: “It is true; I recognize Margaret’s spirit there. Well, I will intrude upon her presence no more.”

“You do not, you *cannot*, mean it, my son? She was angry when she spoke; women always long to recall such words.”

“This letter is deliberate enough,” extending the crushed document, bitterly. “There are no signs of softening there!”

The Laird was almost at his wit’s end. “Your mother, Rupert, think of her, if you have no contrition towards Margaret!”

“When a miserable task has to be done, it had better be done at once. My mother will spare me a leave-taking.”

“Has all natural feeling died out of you, lad?” cried the Laird, in a trembling voice. “If your heart lies in the coffin of that dead woman, have common justice for the living. I’ll talk to you no more; you’ll come to a better mind by-and-by!”

The old man could not control his feelings any longer; the tears coursed down his cheeks as he quitted the room hastily. Colonel Fielding was too self-absorbed to observe this emotion, and as soon as he was alone he began to read and re-read Sylvan Holt’s letter, which, at each perusal, only heightened his anger and strengthened his resolution. While still full of the fire of his indignation, he indited a brief reply of cold acquiescence in its expressed wishes and sent it to the post. When he met the Laird afterwards, he told him what he had done.

“Is it irretrievable? Oh! Rupert, I never knew till now how cruel and vindictive you could be. That girl will break her heart!” cried the old man; “send another letter after it to unsay your determination, or suffer me to do it.”

“No.”

There was an expression in the Colonel’s face, as he enunciated this brief denial of all further interference, which silenced the Laird; he had not exaggerated his son’s implacable character in speaking of him to Sylvan Holt—he was not to be

turned from his purpose now by any argument or entreaty that could be used.

Soon after Colonel Fielding returned to the house where Mrs. Hamilton had died, and had an interview with her father and brother. Mr. Stanley seemed terribly grief-smitten for the loss of his daughter; and said, in a tone of bitter regret, pointing to the room in which she lay—

“Her whole life, from beginning to end, has been a sacrifice; but for you she would have died without a friend near her.”

There was no idea of displeasure in his mind; he did not inquire how it was that the Colonel found himself at Nice at this juncture; he asked after Margaret, and, without waiting for a reply, went on to express his gratitude that Frances had had those she loved about her at her end. He then said it was his intention to remove her for interment to the family vault at Riverscourt, and that they should leave Nice the same evening.

This arrangement set Colonel Fielding's own movements free; he saw the mournful cortége depart, and then rejoined his father. The next morning they started together for Marseilles; and, finding that there was an interval of twelve days to elapse before a vessel would sail, they proceeded to London, where Mrs. Fielding, Katie, and Cecy had arrived before them, in obedience to a letter despatched by the Laird, when he found that his son's resolution was unalterable. Again there was the scene of pathetic entreaty and stern denial to go through. Colonel Fielding would not abate one iota of his offended pride; and by dint of daily dwelling on Sylvan Holt's letter, he, at length, succeeded in working himself into a belief that Margaret and not he was the most blameable and vindictive; but it did not occur to him that, in such a case, he might have extended towards her his imperial forgiveness. He suffered miserably, notwithstanding that his love for his young wife seemed to have undergone a temporary suspension of animation; when its passionate moment of revival overtook him then would begin his punishment, but before that period came there was half the world between them, and, what might be less easy to repass, a seething torrent of empoisoned memories.

CHAPTER LX.

THE DESERTED WIFE.

AFTER the Laird's departure from the Grange, Margaret had been for some time too excited to reflect; but when a few hours had elapsed she was compelled candidly to review her own and her husband's position with regard to each other. Sylvan Holt repeated to her what the Laird had said about his son's not leaving Frances while she lived, and told her also what he had just learnt from his newspaper—that the officers on leave from India were recalled. When she heard this, a sort of calm despair fell upon her; it seemed that fate had beforehand decreed their separation by one means or another. With that, anger left her and sorrow came in its stead. She had already settled in her own mind that Rupert did not love her, never had loved her, and never would love her except in a secondary way, and that removed the difficulty if not the anguish from her path. To come back to her from Frances's deathbed might now be spared him; he might, he *must* mourn for her, but not in his unhappy wife's forgiving arms! No; she could not take in exchange for her all of youth and love the lukewarm ashes of a passion that was smouldered out. His absence she could endure, but his indifference never! It would be better for her, better for him, that he should return to India without seeing her any more.

"It is not his fault if he could not love me like her," Margaret unreasonably pleaded against herself; and she pitied *both*, that Frances should be torn out of life reluctant, unready, and still dearest to him of all women. Hence the letter that Colonel Fielding received from Sylvan Holt the morning after her death.

Margaret had tried to write to him with her own hand, but her tears fell like rain upon the paper, and again and again her pen faltered into reproaches and pitiful betrayals of her distress; if she had let that blotted letter go it would have brought back her husband eager and penitent to her feet, but in the proud idea that if he did not *love* he should not compassionate her, she tore it up and relinquished the task to her

father, begging him not to give any expression to his very natural resentment. She saw the letter when it was written, and sanctioned it, but when it was gone she wished it had been gentler, softer, kinder; that it had conveyed some shadow of the great sorrow, love, and pity that stirred her heart still for her husband; but she never spoke a word to that effect. Sylvan Holt took refuge at first in a grim taciturnity; then he roused himself and made a rapid clearance of the Grange. Sandy he despatched to London with the Colonel's baggage; Elspie was sent home to Manselands; and the rest of the servants were ordered back to Abbeymeads, there to await further orders. Jacky retained her niece Martha in the kitchen, but in every other respect the Wildwood establishment was reduced to its old footing. A single day sufficed to effect this change, and not till it was done, did Sylvan Holt appear to breathe freely.

Margaret perceived that her father regarded the letter that had been sent to her husband as final, and that he considered their accounts closed. Very hard did she struggle to keep her grief under when he was there; and inexpressible was the relief when she could be alone and give way to it. He seemed intuitively to understand this, and unless she came to him he never sought her; even Jacky was avoided, and Mrs. Joan Clervaux's visits were only renewals of pain—or rather renewals of the expression of it, for the pain always continued.

Mrs. Joan, from having been highly indignant against Colonel Fielding, had become his most strenuous advocate; more, it must be allowed, for her favourite's sake than his. The Indian order had converted her. "If you must part, part friends," was the text from which she daily preached. Margaret replied that she had no choice; her husband had left her; she could not seek him; and her father had forbidden him to come to Wildwood; and she looked forward to the sailing of the "Oriental" as the end of all things; beyond it, there seemed no future. She had reckoned the number of days that must elapse before her father's letter could reach Nice, and before an answer could come, if one were sent, and it was with a sickness of anxiety that she watched the hill that morning for Tibbie Ryder's appearance, but she never came.

Sylvan Holt had taken his gun and gone down that way; she half suspected it might be to meet the postmistress; but the day grew to noon, to evening, and he did not return. It

was quite night when she heard him slowly cross the hall and mount the stairs; he went heavily, as if borne down by some mortal weariness or pain. As he entered the parlour soon after, she looked towards him with wistful inquiry, and he, leaning down to caress the child who lay in her lap, said, "You have your baby, Maggie; he must comfort you as you once comforted me."

"There was no letter, then, from Rupert this morning, father; was there?" she asked, tremulously.

Sylvan Holt hesitated; he had Colonel Fielding's brief reply to his own missive in his pocket, and he wished to keep it back from his daughter. But she was not to be deceived; she knew he was withholding something, and begged him to give her it. Reluctantly he complied; and as she read its few cold lines he averted his eyes from her face, unable to bear its look of pain.

"Insulting! cruel and insulting!" was her comment, as she dropped it into a scarlet hollow of the fire. "Can it, indeed, be Rupert—can it, indeed, be my husband, who writes thus!" The indignant pride, that had flashed into her countenance at first, seemed now to retire upon her heart and crush out all its strength; her voice took a most sorrowful intonation, her face an expression of restless misery pitiable in one so young, as she said despondingly—"Fate has been against us all; it was fore-ordained that I should not be happy—perhaps, I suffer for my mother's sin—I cannot tell."

"Maggie, Maggie, do not speak in that way!" pleaded her father; "I cannot endure it—it kills me."

"I have been the innocent cause of much misery—my own not the least," Margaret continued, with eyes fixed on the cavern of the fire where her husband's letter had disappeared. "I feel grieved for Rupert; it was not his fault if he could not love me, but he might have left me to those who did. I do not seek to reproach him, but he has destroyed my life."

"You will cease soon to lament him, Maggie; better live apart than live together without love or with love only on one side," said Sylvan Holt; "our family do not die of heart-break, and he deserves your contempt rather than your regret."

A glow shone through Margaret's fair skin; her eyes dilated and glittered.

"Father, dear, I accept my lot as it has fallen to me," replied she, in a trembling tone; "'tis hard, cruel, and unjust enough,

but I shall learn to bear it—only let us not speak of Rupert often, for *that* I cannot bear.”

She got up, and, with her baby close clasped to her bosom, began to pace the room. Her father was like her own heart to her; instinctively he knew her feelings, and sought to respond to them; but his anger against Colonel Fielding was deadlier than ever, and scarcely could he refrain from giving violent expression to it. He began to blame himself for short-sightedness in having consented to his darling's ill-omened marriage with a dissembler so accomplished; his wrath was now intemperate in accusation, and he chose to regard his son-in-law as a complete and unscrupulous man of the world, who would recklessly indulge a caprice of passion, no matter what the cost. Nothing could have prevailed on him to believe in the literal facts of the case; so whatever he said, whether meant to incite his daughter's pride, or to soothe her grief, only chilled her heart the more.

Margaret endured it, though it was torture; endured it in silence, except that now and then she said, “Don't, dear father; don't—you hurt me!” for, indeed, his anger was like the touch of an unskilful hand about an agonizing wound. It was a cessation of one pain when bed-time came, and she could get away into solitude and darkness with her sorrow—a sorrow too real and too palpable yet, for her to see beyond the thick curtain of gloom which it had drawn across her life.

On the morrow about mid-day Mrs. Joan Clervaux found her way up to the Grange; Sylvan Holt was absent, and Margaret was alone in her chamber. There was no need to ask what news; the old lady read in her favourite's face that the time of anxiousness yet of hope was past, and that the deadliest blow that could fall had fallen.

“It is all over, Mrs. Joan; Rupert will return to me no more—not even for a word of farewell, and he is going to India,” said Margaret, hurriedly clasping her old friend's fingers in her burning nervous hand; “we had his letter yesterday.”

“Gipsy, Gipsy, you cannot mean it! You will never be such a proud young fool as to let him go!” cried Mrs. Joan, almost angrily.

“I would not if he loved me, but he does not love me, and I can do nothing. He has humiliated me, but I will not humiliate myself.”

Margaret's face was pale, her beautiful eyes were clouded; all the night watches since Rupert left her she had kept with tears—but she did not weep now; she tried to carry her sorrow quietly, and as for her tears their source seemed to be dried up; there was a wasting fever upon her which burnt and shivered in her veins alternately; you would scarcely have recognised in her the glad-hearted, blooming young creature of a month ago. Mrs. Joan watched her with dismay.

"Does he know how his conduct is killing you?" said she. "Oh! Gipsy, my darling, my darling, can nothing be changed of all this folly and misery! 'Twas very selfish in poor Frances to draw him away, but I do, I *do*, think his heart was, and is yours."

"Ah! no, no! you would not say so if you had read the letter my father received from him yesterday—so cold, and indifferent, so *cruel* it seemed to me—for I have done him no wrong, unless it be that I have loved him too well! I said that I never desired to see his face again, and I thought so *then*; but *now*, now that he is going away and may come back no more, I could go on my knees to him to beseech a kind word, a word that we might both remember, if our separation be for ever; he is my little one's father—I can't, I can't forget that! How shall I teach my baby to love him if we are to be always divided? What shall I do, Mrs. Joan? He does not love me, or the rest would be easy. Don't think I could not forgive him his distrust of me; my heart is so broken I could forgive him anything!" She spoke with nervous rapidity and force, clasping and unclasping her hands in unconscious wildness of anguish. Mrs. Joan's eyes grew dim with pity for irrepressible suffering.

"You are right now, Gipsy," said she; "between husband and wife there may come wounds of love, but an enduring pique of pride is a wicked thing which you ought not to perpetuate. You spoke of little Alick just now; he ought to draw you together and unite the broken link of his parents' lives; you must not let Rupert go to India unforgiven and unforgiving!"

"But how can I help it?" questioned Margaret; "I wish I had retained his letter; there you would have seen that he puts me off coldly, quietly, unfeelingly, as an ill-fitting garment that it has irked him to wear."

"I will not say, 'no matter,' Margaret, but that does not efface your wifely duty; you cannot dissolve the sacredness of

your marriage *now*, 'tis done for good and all when once 'tis done—for the child's sake part friends; so that later, when time has scarred your wounds, or cleared up misunderstanding, or cooled the vehemence of passion, you may live out your lives as you should, bearing and forbearing mutually."

"That cold pretence instead of real affection! no, no, Mrs. Joan; I cannot look to that. I *have* thought he loved me—how could he lie so like the truth?"

"I am sure he loved you, Margaret, and that he loves you still, though, perhaps, even to himself his heart is for the time eclipsed; but the cold shadow will pass, and then——"

"Don't, don't, you torture me!" cried Margaret; "do I not remember his letter, and that he is going to India—what use of change *there*?"

"There is a long life before you, Gipsy," said Mrs. Joan, gently. "The Colonel will come back to England again, and how will you meet?"

Margaret hid her face; "I know not, or whether we ever shall meet," said she, after a pause; "the world is wide."

"I wish you would write to him, Margaret; write to him out of the aching depths of your loving heart; do, darling, that would touch him more sharply than any reproach."

"I cannot, I cannot trail myself to his feet a suppliant; nay, I will not!" cried Margaret, with sudden fire; "he left me and I will show him that I can live without him. He is mourning now for the loss of Frances, 'tis not for me to witness his regret—I will not push myself into his thoughts at such a time—let him go; it is, as my father says, better that we should live apart."

For the moment all softness of feminine feeling seemed to have given way to the passionate vehemence of her natural character. Mrs. Joan knew well the wilful significance of her erected head and quivering lip; her countenance took a strange resemblance to her father's while that burning resentment thrilled her heart, but this phase of feeling passed soon, and she dropped nerveless into the chair from which she had risen, saying in a tone of indescribable pathos—"Tis of no use, Mrs. Joan—this is no question of what *I* would or would not. Rupert is the master; he is gone, and I am alone; it is less miserable for both of us thus than if we were condemned to the endurance of each other's presence; I will speak for myself—I would rather, far rather, never see him more than see him

other than he was. Judge, then, if he has not decided justly, he does not love me, and I know, and well *he* knows too, that no feigning could ever again make me think he did."

Mrs. Joan sighed profoundly; she could not bear to use to Margaret that common-place argument, which to herself felt almost immoral, that even the failure of affection was no sufficient plea for separation in her case, because the poor young wife based on it all her thoughts. The persuasion that Rupert did not love her bound her hand and foot. The idea of public gossip had now become the smallest element in her humiliation; it is not when we are beaten to the earth with an iron grief that we can heed what idle tongues may say; thus Margaret ceased now to think of the great indignity she had endured at her husband's hands, and dwelt only on the loss of what had been the glory and bliss of her youth—the faithful and ardent love of one whom she had esteemed beyond all men faithful, brave, and good. Her hero of pure gold was golden still (for what she considered as the mistake of their marriage could not change his identity), but he was no longer *her* hero; what was noble and generous in him could not be her pride or her possession any more—their separation seemed utterly completed—complete and for ever.

Mrs. Joan pleaded hard with her to make an advance towards reconciliation with her husband, but she could not prevail, and at last took her leave much disheartened. When she was gone, Margaret went up to the dreary corridor and tired herself out bodily; she had not courage to face the out-door sunshine, she had never crossed the threshold of the Grange since that day down at Oakfield when Bell Rowley had told her where Rupert was. Jacky heard her step pass by the nursery door; and when her dear young mistress was out of sight, she set it open and began to sing to the baby one of the many queer chaunts that she had recently learnt for his delectation. Oscar was there by the hearth half asleep and half awake, but at the sound of Margaret's foot he rose up with a ponderous yawn and stretch of his great limbs, and betook himself to join her march up and down the corridor, following as she went and turning as she turned with lugubrious perseverance and fidelity. The dog knew she was in trouble, and when once she stopped by the window, and leant her aching forehead against the glass, he thrust up his cold nose to her face as if trying to insinuate the comfort that there was one faithful, unselfish friend near her.

Jacky was strangely discomposed by the mysterious transactions that had been recently taking place at the Grange, but as yet she only suspected the final event. Margaret had said to her that morning, "Jacky, is my old room that I used to sleep in just as it was? I want to go back to it." Jacky told her "Yes," and it was on the tip of her tongue to add, "When are we to get t' Colonel home again?" when her mistress turned hurriedly from her as if dreading any question.

While Margaret now paced the cold and gloomy corridor, the servant listened and reflected:

"Surely he can't ha' left her," said she to herself, "when she loved him better than ever woman yet loved ane o' his fause kind—left this princely bairn, too? Eh, but it looks sadly like it; I'd never any opinion o' sweethearting an' marrying. T' upshot's aye trouble mair or less. Them's wisest 'at can keep clear o' baith, like me."

Alick began to coo, and then to fret a little, so Jacky carried him to the door that his mother might hear him and come down; presently she appeared, her face brightening unconsciously as she met his smile, and took him in her tender arms. The old servant watched her narrowly as the shadow was again dropped over her countenance; and at last she said, with an affectionate soothing which took from her question all tone of prying curiosity—

"Margaret, there's something dreadful t' matter; tell Jacky what it is? I don't believe folk's talk, for it's past believing."

"My husband is going away to India, Jacky," was the almost inaudible reply.

"Then, why isn't he here now?" demanded the servant, sharply, "or why are not you wi' him? It passes me altogether; I can't understand it! Has mistress Tibbie Ryder told only a true tale in t' valley then? Oh, bairn——" Jacky read her answer in Margaret's face, and clasping her round with her hard red arms, she began to cry and storm alternately.

"An' he has left you—ill befall him!" said she; "I'll never trust t' fair looks or t' fair words o' mortal man again, if he did not worship the very ground you went on! Satan's sel' must ha' beguiled him; I'll credit no other. He's not awa o' his ain gude will; he's been bewitched!"

At any other moment Margaret would have smiled at Jacky's vehemence and peculiarity of denunciation, but now she scarcely heard it, and could not contradict it. Her father came home

while she was sitting by the nursery fire with the child, and took her down to the parlour.

The days were short now, and it fell dark early, so that there were many long hours for them to sit together almost silent—neither could bear to speak of indifferent things, and the one subject which absorbed all their thoughts both avoided. The last few weeks had aged Sylvan Holt fast; his iron-grey hair was white almost, his erect frame stooped, his firm, decisive step had begun to drag and falter, as if soon it might fail and cease from the earth altogether. His last joy—his darling's bright smile and happy heart—had passed out of his life and left it blank.

CHAPTER LXI.

A CHANGE OF SCENE.

THREE more weary days dragged over at Wildwood Grange: there was a hush and stillness through the house such as always seem to pervade the atmosphere where broods any great calamity. Out of doors the gossips talked! They laid their heads together, and dilated copiously on the separation between Colonel Fielding and his wife, its causes and its consequences. They had always predicted some event of the kind as the climax of such a strangely assorted marriage; but, no doubt, said the moralist section, there had been faults on both sides—there always were in these lamentable cases. Some speculated as to whether Margaret would be allowed to retain possession of her child, and here the young mother had all the women on her side. Mrs. Joan Clervaux explained, defended, reasoned, and grew angry with her friends for the manner in which they chose to discuss affairs which were no concern of theirs.

"Why, Mrs. Joan, don't we all know how neighbours take our private griefs to heart!" cried Miss Bell Rowley, who had led off the cry of Margaret's desertion; "I am very sorry for the Colonel and Margaret, because they are both behaving in such a silly and wrong-headed way, and everybody can see it but themselves. But are we not to *talk*? The calamities of our acquaintance seem to me a special dispensation in our

favour, or we should be dulled to death for lack of news. When our turn comes, shall we not also furnish a theme for the polite morning call and the genial after-dinner mood? And shall we not be grateful for the good even afflicted folks can do in beguiling the tedium of an hour amongst their condoling neighbours?"

"God knows, we can bear philosophically enough what does not touch our own skin," retorted Mrs. Joan, bitterly; "and that very few of us spare to lay the lash upon an erring friend."

Some one, Tibbie Ryder, probably, or it might be Jaques, suggested to the irate and contemptuous Jacky that Colonel Fielding could, if he chose, remove his son from Margaret's custody and place him elsewhere, and the old servant, not very judiciously, carried the remark home to her young mistress; but she, to her credit be it said, repudiated the idea that her husband could ever become her persecutor; nevertheless, it haunted her afterwards continually when Alick was out of her sight.

"Father, could we not go away from Mirkdale for a little while?" she one evening asked, when this thought had taken a tenacious hold upon her; she had a vague notion of hiding herself and the child in some solitude where they would never be discovered.

"Yes, Maggie; we will go away for altogether if you desire it," replied Sylvan Holt, eagerly; this is what he had himself been secretly wishing—any change that would stir her out of her blank silence of sorrow would be welcome to him. He was ready to efface all his own long habits of seclusion to win such consolation for her as he could.

"Where shall we go? I think if we could get out of England. Father, take me to see my mother's grave! It seems to me as if that would nerve me to bear my own fate better—*her* sufferings were far beyond *mine*."

"Yes, Maggie, yes," was Sylvan Holt's hurried answer; "I will make that pilgrimage with you. You should have made it before."

'There is always something selfish in a profound sorrow; Margaret's thoughts were so busy with her own burden, that she did not note the clayey pallor that overspread her father's countenance, or the agony, physical as well as mental, that convulsed him for a little while. He struggled through it

without a groan, and then began to speak of the few necessary arrangements for their journey. "Jacky will go with us—and would you like Mrs. Joan Clervaux?" he asked.

"If she could go; it does me good to be with her." It did her good because Mrs. Joan was the only person who still persisted in speaking kindly of her husband and hopefully of their future; she would not for a moment give ear to such a suggestion as that their separation was to be perpetual: she also maintained her opinion that Rupert loved his wife, and that his wife ought to love and forgive him; all which soothed Margaret, though she contradicted it.

Mrs. Joan had a mortal antipathy to travelling, but she immediately acceded to Sylvan Holt's request for her company for Margaret's sake, and they all left Mirkdale together. It was the worst season of the year also for a journey, the days being short, dark, and cold, but it was in harmony with the feelings of at least two of the party;—sunshine, the cheery laughter of nature, would have seemed to mock them. Jacky thought the expedition foolish in the extreme, but she held her peace and kept Alick in high good-humour,—a feat of some difficulty under all the circumstances—until they arrived at their journey's end.

Then Margaret for the first time seemed to sink down into apathetic rest, as if she had attained to safety from a threatening danger. For two or three days she kept her room, Mrs. Joan rarely leaving her, while Sylvan Holt endured a solitude full of the racking torments such as that place, of all others, was calculated to awaken in his breast. But one morning he proposed to take her out: she knew whither, and she consented. A carriage was at the door of the hotel, which they entered, and were driven to a village church some miles beyond the suburbs of the town. In a secluded corner of its remote graveyard, where the grass was long and the funereal shrubs were dense even then, there was set up a lowly cross without any legend, or text, or name, or date. Beneath that cross lay the dust of Sylvan Holt's wife and Margaret's unknown mother. It was a mournful place, and the day was mournful; pale, hazy-blue was the sky, dank and moist the winter earth; but they knelt down in company beside the grave, and stayed there some time. Sylvan Holt in its presence began to regain a certain calm, and he said at last with a settled recognition of the fact, "I have no right in this poor grave, Maggie; hate divorced

her from me before death, but you were her child that she did love ; for you there may, in some mysterious future, be recognition and love again, but for me—nothing ; she would turn and fly from me with shrieks like those that once rang in my ears, and have never since ceased to echo there.”

Margaret took her father's arm and drew him away silently—the tears that were falling now fell not for herself but for him. They took their way back into Marseilles, each feeling that the pilgrimage they had made to that grave was their last.

In regaining their hotel it happened that they had to traverse a considerable part of the city, and in one of the busier streets becoming entangled in a throng of other vehicles, their carriage could only move at a foot's pace. Margaret's gaze rested on the hurrying crowd without distinguishing individuals for a long while, but suddenly her eyes were startled into clear vision, and she exclaimed, while the colour flushed her face, “There is Rupert ! there is my husband !”

Sylvan Holt leant forward and saw him too. He was threading his way rapidly amongst the moving throng, Sandy close behind him, carrying what looked like the hastily caught-up remains of his master's baggage—a cloak, a desk strapped round with a leather thong, and a little knapsack. Margaret's idea was that he had come thither in search of her, and she looked eagerly from the window ; Sandy caught sight of her, pressed to the Colonel's side, and seemed to give him some hurried information ; but his master impatiently shook his hand off, and, without turning his head, darted into the open door of a great hotel and disappeared.

This incident took less time to enact than it has taken to relate ; as Colonel Fielding vanished within the hall the crowd of carriages separated, and the driver of Sylvan Holt's took advantage of a clear space in the street to dash forward at a gallop. Margaret's countenance changed from its expression of startled eagerness to a petrified coldness as her father said—

“He is going by Marseilles instead of Southampton, it seems. What ill-luck has made our paths cross here ?”

“No ill-luck, father dear, but a merciful Providence, to teach me for what an insensate rock I have been grieving, and to cure me of such womanish folly !” replied Margaret, bitterly ; “although Sandy told him I was within a dozen yards, he would not even look towards me ; it is indeed well that we are to meet no more !”

"You would like to get away quickly from Marseilles, Maggie? 'T will be best so."

"Yes, yes; do not let him think he is pursued; we will leave at once—this very afternoon. I cannot breathe this air; it stifles me." Margaret met Mrs. Joan while her firmness was in its strength, and told her what had happened, coloured by all the indignation that burnt in her heart. The old lady wasted no time in argument or entreaty, but, evading her favourite's presence, as soon as she could she went forth herself, intending to seek out Colonel Fielding and bring him to his wife; she was sure he could not have understood Sandy, or that nothing would have withheld him from being with her now. Some time elapsed before she found the hotel which Margaret had described to her, and on inquiry she was told that Colonel Fielding and his servant had gone an hour or more previous to embark on board the "Simoom," which was to have sailed the day before but had been deferred. The indefatigable Mrs. Joan, buoyed up by a hope which, alas! grew momentarily fainter, that the "Simoom" might have suffered another detention, caused herself to be driven to the place of embarkment, but the vessel was gone. She was almost disposed to cry with Margaret that there was a fate in it!

They left Marseilles that afternoon to go straight home to Wildwood. "I shall be all your own again, father!" said Margaret, with a spasm of feigned carelessness; "we will try to renew our old life, and to forget that we have ever had an interloper between us." Then her eyes fell on her child's sleepy face in Jacky's arms opposite her, and the bitter-gay voice dropped into a long silence.

Mrs. Joan never told any one but Jacky, who sympathized fully in her views, of her long and vain quest after the Colonel and his servant. Jacky had had her own anxieties as to whether or no he *might* claim little Alick, and was relieved to find herself once more safe with him and his mother in familiar Mirkdale, and his hard father far away.

CHAPTER LXII.

OUT ON THE MOORLAND.

THUS Margaret, but little more than a year after her marriage, found herself once more living her narrow uneventful life, the child in her arms almost the only visible difference between then and now. She took her loneliness sorely, sorely to heart; and if for a few proud indignant hours she had cheated herself into a belief that she could bear this severance with a calm equanimity, the delusion faded like a vision as soon as she found her monotonous days gliding on without any sensible decrease in her pain and regret. Hers was, indeed, a hard and bitter lot; all the charm of youth and love was departed from her, and she had in its stead the drag-chain of mortified feeling and wantonly wasted happiness. Sylvan Holt at this season surrounded her with every care that his anxious and watchful heart could devise; his life had suddenly grown valuable in his own eyes, worthless as it had been but a little while ago, because he longed to consecrate its years to caring for and tending her. The thought of her unprotected state if he were gone haunted him night and day,—haunted him most cruelly when struggling in those untold pangs which he knew, through Macmichal's warning, might any hour hurry him from the world. Already, though perhaps in mercy he saw it not, the shadow of death was upon him, and its hand shortened to strike.

Events at this period of Margaret's existence trode closely one upon the heels of another. Scarcely had she rallied from the severe shock of one suffering before she was again shaken, and again her strength almost succumbed under the overwhelming force of a fresh sorrow. If her life had bright sunshine, which it certainly had, the shadows that contrasted it were very long and very dark.

One evening she was pacing the parlour to and fro as the darkness fell. Sylvan Holt was abroad with his gun; and she had her child in her arms, and was crooning to it softly a lullaby song, which ever and anon sank into a cooing murmur on his dewy lips. They had now been back at Wildwood full

a fortnight, and she began to realize the cold blank of her early widowhood in all its weary desolateness; many, many a tear would have dropped on the pretty baby face had she not turned it to her bosom, and let them fall on her own clasping hands instead. The wood fire upon the hearth had been lately replenished, so that while the night closed like a curtain outside the windows, and the great motionless trees were slowly absorbed into its blackness, the room was fitfully illumined by the rising and falling of the flames. The door was a little ajar, and Jacky had crept stealthily to the opening to watch her darling herself unseen. Her faithful old hands were hard pressed against her bosom, to keep down the groans of sorrowing pity that would else have broken out at the picture she beheld. Margaret's tall slender form was thrown slightly back, to enable her to carry her burden the easier, and her noble face was bent down towards the child. Jacky knew that she was crying, though she could not see her tears—the posture of her head was expressive of such deep grief—such utter weariness and dejection, weariness of heart and brain, for the body still carried its cross proudly enough.

“Oh! my bairn, my bonnie bairn!” was the inward cry of Jacky's steadfast soul; “it's not to my poor arms you come for comfort now.”

She saw Margaret pause by the window and look abroad into the murky night, and then as she again addressed herself to her march through the room, she breathed a deep sigh, and said; “Oh! baby, baby, if it were not for your little hands upon my breast, I should wish that I were dead!” and then she took the little hands and pressed them to her lips, in a long, fond kiss. Jacky held her breath and leant her wrinkled forehead against the door side, while her eyes filled with tears growing dim and soft. Margaret had presently walked herself weary, and then she dropped into a low chair by the hearth, and suckled the child, who woke up with a smile. Jacky could see her smiling into the baby's eyes too; and now when she spoke it was in the nursing mother voice—all love, and caress, and sweetness. At length the little one lay back on her lap satisfied, and laughed and crowed in Margaret's face, as she played with him.

“My wee one! oh, my baby, it is good for me that I have you,” said she, in a tone of inexpressible tenderness; “I think, baby, if he had not given me you I should have ——” She

checked the expression of some violent feeling with a shudder, and dropped her face upon her hand. The child whimpered as if he were frightened, and recovering herself she began to dance him about, and to sing a lively tune; she did not cease until she was almost out of breath, and then, as a continuation of the play, she bent over him and whispered; "Baby, where is papa now? Where is he. Far away on the deep sea, sailing away from us further and further! Will he *ever* come back! Is he thinking of us, my darling? Perhaps he is walking on the deck this dark night, and trying to fancy what his wife and his boy are doing. Baby, I hope he fancies how we love him; he must never think we could give up loving him; must he?"

The child crowed triumphantly, and put his wee soft palms together, as if he were going to clap them in applause; while Margaret leant back in her chair, and watched him admiringly; her countenance had brightened insensibly.

"Oscar, come and look at baby," said she; "come and look at him." The gaunt animal stalked majestically over towards his mistress and sat down at her knees. His youthful vivacity was beginning to yield to a sombre dignity, as if he foresaw the coming cares of life.

"Old friend, old friend! I think you have found out I am not your wild Gipsy companion any more! We grow sober both of us. Let us go and see what poor Jacky is doing in the kitchen. It is a dull house, Oscar, now; you miss him too, I know!" And Margaret rose from her seat, with the boy sitting upon her arm more solidly and firmly than babies generally do—he never doubled up; the old servant stole back to her quarters, and pretended to be setting out the tea things when Margaret appeared.

Margaret placed herself in the corner of the lang-settle, where she had so often sat when a child to listen to Jacky's fireside stories, and after a little quiet watching of her baby's face, which was again settling into a rosy sleep, she turned in a listening posture towards the door, and said, "It is a cold dark night, Jacky; I wish my father would not stay out so late on the moor. He must have gone very far not to have come home before this. He is often out after nightfall now; he did not use to be formerly."

"His shooting over Holm Wood takes him out o' t' way," replied Jacky; "may be the birds have been a bit wildish, and

master never likes to bring back a empty bag. He'll be in enow; I thowt I heard t' fauld-yard gate click a minute sin? Hark, now!"

"That is not my father's step, but there's something scratching at the door; what is it, Jacky? Will you see?"

Jacky opened the door on the instant, and there immediately sprang in Carlo and Bess, the two dogs that Sylvan Holt had taken out with him that afternoon. The footmarks they made on the whitened stone floor were a great offence to the old servant's domestic notions of cleanliness, and she instantly drove them, forth screaming to Anty, who was crossing the yard with his lantern at the moment, to shut them up in their kennel, Anty whistled and called them by name, but they still hovered on the threshold, though Jacky repulsed them vehemently, exclaiming, "Get awa' wi' you; get awa' wi' you; I won't ha' you i' my kitchen at no end!" and so she shut the door upon them, remarking to Margaret as she again drew near the hearth that it was not like master to leave his dogs straying about when he brought them home after a hard day's work. They heard Anty whistling in vain; one of the beasts had sat down just outside the door, and lifting up its muzzle gave vent to a dismal howl. Jacky looked out of the window at it and said—

"What ails the uncanny beast? Get awa' to your kennel, Bess!" But as Bess did not stir, she again opened the door and called to Anty—

"Has master come home yet, Anty?"

"He'll be here direc'ly—I see him at t' slip stee up o' t' hill mayhap five minutes sin!"

"Get this Bess awa' fra' t' door; she maks noise enew to flay t' neebourhood, and I'll gie her some meat."

"I can't be fashed wi' t' dogs now; I'se going to supper up t' kye. It's your feeding 'em about door brings 'em there!" and with that Anty disappeared into the cow-house with his lantern, and Jacky again excluded Bess, having first thrown her a plate of bones.

Margaret sat quietly in her corner for a minute or two longer, and then lifting her baby in her arms, she passed out of the kitchen, and across the hall to the parlour. It had fallen dismally gloomy there, and for an instant she was so sure that she saw her father sitting in his customary place by the hearth, that she actually spoke to him, but the next moment a tongue of flame blazed out as a log fell lower upon the ashes, and

showed her that his chair was empty, while Oscar, who had followed her, manifested a singular uneasiness. She returned quickly to the kitchen, crying out, "Jacky, Jacky, my father has not come back, can anything have happened to him? Call Anty herè, and see how strange and restless Oscar is—he trembles all over!" Anty appeared at the summons, and leant in at the kitchen door holding his lantern so that it threw a long line of weird light in the direction of the fauld-yard gate.

"Which way did my father go when you saw him at the slip stee, Anty? Are you sure it was your master?" Margaret asked.

"Oh! yes, ma'am, it was master; I see him plain, but he never spoke—an' he was na *going* at all but *stan'ning* still like," was the man's reply.

While he was speaking, Carlo came back whining.

"What ails t' beast—he's possessed surely," said Jacky, as the dog scurried away barking in the direction of the moor.

"He seems to want somebody to follow him," Margaret said; "there is a meaning in what he does. Jacky, bring me my plaid, and get your lantern. Where is Martha? let her take baby."

Martha came from the dairy, where she had been scouring her milk skeels, and accepted her trust, when Jacky bid her go up to his cot immediately; and then she let Margaret fold her plaid about her head and without a word of remonstrance start off towards the place where Anty said he had last seen his master, Bess and Carlo running on before and Oscar following with head and tail depressed. Tom, whom they encountered just outside the fauld-yard gate, turned and went with them.

Margaret's face had blanched at the shock she had received in the parlour, but she had a perfect command of herself—more even than Jacky, whose fears had taken a defined shape of which she dared not speak.

The point for which they were bending their steps was one of those narrow gaps in the stone fences common in Mirkdale, which ran across the moor about half a quarter of a mile from the Grange. They reached it without having met Sylvan Holt, without, perhaps, having expected to meet him. There was a grizzled old thorn-tree leaning over it at one side, which Anty might have mistaken for his master's figure in the gloom; but he was not there, nor any sign of him; and Carlo and Bess still ran on straight forward in the direction Margaret knew

her father often took in his shooting expeditions, as it brought him by a short cut to the covers at Holm Wood sooner than the track.

Once on the open-hill side it was not a very dark night; but the sky hung so low that it seemed as if an upraised hand could touch its leaden arch. The broken ground that rose on either side of the path along which the dogs were leading them, showed with a curious distinctness, though every object—sky, grass, bush, heather, even their own figures were suffused with the same cold, impalpable grey—colourless as hues of death; while here and there gleamed a wan water pool, darkened a narrow gryp, or yawned a forsaken quarry. The lime-kilns burning by night were like lurid watchfires with streaming shrouds of smoke trailed down the slopes, and the soft wind that crept low and whispered in the heather was as if the earth shuddered and its life ran cold in its veins.

Margaret walked very swiftly, so swiftly that it was almost more than Jacky could do to keep pace with her.

"Bairn, bairn, what do you look to find?" said she, hurriedly; "may be master's at home this minute thinking we're all run mad."

"No, Jacky, you know he's not," Margaret replied.

"It's not like him to bide out; I wish I'd brought a sup o' brandy; he may ha' fa'en ill upo' t' moor; he *may*, you know." Jacky glanced up in her mistress's face to learn what *she* feared; but the darkness baffled her scrutiny; then she talked on to cover her alarm. "He's been strange and doun lately about you, bairn; I wish we'd ta'en more tent o' him: nay, but we took every tent we could, surely! I seed nought to ail him when he walked through t' kitchen this afternoon an' went out."

"Hush, Jacky! did you not hear a groan down the hill where the furze grows thick?"

They paused and listened a few breathless seconds.

"It is on'y t' little beck sobbing ower the stones below," murmured the servant. "Where's Bess going alongside that gryp? It's soft walking there; t' path turns sharp here, we'll keep to it, it's safest!"

Again they hurried forward, but when they had gone about fifty paces beyond the bend in the track, Carlo and Bess being in advance of them, Jacky suddenly flung her arms round Margaret, crying out—

"What's yon? Oh, my bairn, my bairn, keep back!" for she saw *something* lying across the pathway at a little distance in front, which might have been the trunk of a tree, if there had been trees there for storms to fell, from any shape it showed in the grey gloom; but the dogs had stopped beside it whining, and so she knew it was her *master*.

Margaret broke away from her grasp, and in an instant was down on her knees beside him. She touched his face, which lay upwards looking towards heaven, and drew back with a sharp ringing cry: never before had her warm living flesh touched the cold unyielding clay of death. She sprang up, asking in wild affright—

"What is it, Jacky? Is my father *dead*?"

Tom stooped down and flashed his lantern on the awful face, over which the passing night air waved the shadowy grey locks, and then said with a stolid but not unfeeling calm—

"Yes, he's dead: master's dead an' stark! an' here's his gun lying close by him loaded. I should say he's just dropped an' soughed awa' i' ane moment, wi'out ony pain at a'."

Jacky was bowed down over him with clasped hands: "Oh! bairn, but he's surely gane home after his troublesome journey, an'll get rest at last!" said she, in an awed, tremulous voice, and taking off her plaid she drew it reverently over the body.

Margaret for several minutes stood aloof staring at the rigid form which her fancy defined through its covering, and then with a moan, she dropped on the ground beside it, and bent her face upon her knees. She did not dare take the frozen hand in hers; that touch of his cold brow had sent a thrill through all her blood, and palsied her warm throbbing heart. "He is dead, he is dead, my father is dead!" she kept repeating to herself in a stunned half-unconscious way. She heard Jacky conferring with Tom about what they must do, and shrank when they fired off the gun as a signal to Anty to bring help; then Tom went away, leaving his lantern on the ground, and the servant knelt beside her, and pressed her in her arms whispering to her such comfort as she could give.

"Oh! bairn, bairn, he was tired out wi' his hard life, an' now he's done wi' it," said she, sobbing; "he's gane where the wicked cease fra' troubling, an' where the weary are at rest—believe it, bairn; I believe it surely!"

"But so lonely, Jacky; if he had died in my arms at home I think I could have borne it, but *out on the moor*! No

one near him—no one to give him a good-bye, or to say a prayer! oh! it is very hard—it is very cruel—why was it? why was it?”

“It was God’s *will*—may be it was God’s *mercy*. We don’t know *wha’* stood by him when he died—angels come and gae amang us yet—we suldn’t say he was *alone*. My bairn, he’s been a changed man o’ late, an’ I’m sure he’s gotten peace.”

Margaret’s flesh shivered to the chill night air, she drew her plaid closer, and laid her arm round the neck of Oscar, who was extended on the ground by her side. “When will they come, Jacky? They are very long,” said she, presently. “Oh, father, father!”

“Cry, bairn, cry, it’ll do you gude!” whispered the old servant; “it’ll ease your sorrow.”

“I can’t cry, Jacky; something seems to clutch my heart, and I’m afraid.”

There was, indeed, an awful weight in the leaden night with the ghostly whispers in the heather and the singing of the full beck below, which seemed to dirge the dead by whom they kept their watch. It was an hour or more before they heard through the solemn stillness the tramp of many feet approaching, and the sound of men’s hurried voices. As they came near Margaret stood up, and they gathered round the body, which they laid upon a door hastily loosed from its hinges for the purpose. Sylvan Holt was a heavy man, and those who bore him had to rest and change several times before they reached the Grange; Margaret, Jacky, and the dogs followed close behind; the servant’s arm—to think that arm was now the best and faithfullest on which she had to lean—supporting her dear mistress. The sad procession went in by the fold-yard gate, through the kitchen, and across the hall, where Tibbie Ryder was standing with a candle to light the way to Sylvan Holt’s room. Macmichal was in the doorway of the parlour; for a moment he stopped the bearers with their burden, lifted the shawl from the dead face, took one certifying glance at it, and then turned quickly to Margaret, guided her into the parlour, and as she sank upon her chair, laid her baby in her arms.

She dropped her face upon the child and began to cry passionately. Where, where was he who should have comforted her!

Macmichal dashed his own hand across his eyes, but he was

relieved to see her ready flow of tears ; for some time he let her weep, but at length tried to speak a word of comfort. "Your father suffered much ; he knew his end would overtake him suddenly," said he, kindly ; "perhaps there never was a man to whom death was more welcome except for the love he bore you."

"I have nobody now," Margaret sobbed ; "nobody on whose daily love I can rely—nobody but my poor little baby !"

Macmichal ventured to remind her of Mrs. Joan Clervaux, who was ever her friend, and asked her if he might go to Oakfield and tell her how much her presence was needed. "Yes ; but I want to be alone now, quite alone," was the answer.

Macmichal immediately left her, and softly closing the door upon her sorrow, he bade Martha, who was crying in the hall, wait at hand lest her mistress should require her. Before quitting the house he strode silently up-stairs and entered Sylvan Holt's room. All the men had vanished, and Tibbie Ryder was beginning to perform her ghastly offices about the corpse. To hear her comments when the doctor was withdrawn was weird and awful. She stood contemplating the pinched, pallid face for some minutes with her tremulous old head on one side, and then said, in a sepulchral tone—

"I ha' streikit mony a corpse in my time, Jacky, but I never, to my knowledge, streikit ane afore that had blood upon his right hand."

"Whist, then, whist ! that blood's not upo' his soul this night," replied the servant ; "his hand may ha' been red ance, but it's white noo, if repentance and Christ's death avail us, an' there's purgatory to cleanse him besides ; an' I am no' clear but it was justifiable that he suld ha' the man's life. Margaret thinks it was, an' it's no for us to judge him. We may surely leave it to God, wha knows all."

"Ay, ay, God be merciful to all o' us, miserable sinners !" ejaculated Tibbie, raising the right hand and looking at the livid palm ; "but here's a mark that shows like a stain o' blood yet, an' they say blood can never be washed out." Again Jacky entreated her to "whist," but Tibbie was not heedful. She had a sombre delight in her office, which in this case had peculiarities that raised it above the ordinary degree of interest. "He's been a fine man i' his day, but he was always sae dour—less o' late than formerly, may be ; but I was never willing to come i' his gate either first or last. Eh ! Jacky, woman, but it's ill dying as he died, wi'out ane word o' kindness : strucken

down as if an enemy had raised his hand against him un-
 awares, an' smote him as he smote yon man years sin'. Don't
 tell me it was for nought he died as he did."

"He had warning months ago," Jacky said; "Macmichal
 telled him how it would be, an' he telled me; but he did not
 want *her* to know;" this intimation was pointed by a movement
 of the head towards the room where Margaret sat below.

"Poor bairn! she's only a bairn herself, wi' her baby at her
 breast, an' never a ane to say God help her!" ejaculated Tibbie,
 pitifully. "It was likings evil would fall out after such a wedding
 day as hers was. I ha' not seen her sin' yon time at t' stag hunt,
 a matter of two months sin', when she rode through Beckford
 with her father an' t' Colonel, blithe an' bonnie as May morning.
 It's well to think that i' t' midst o' life we are in death: God
 keep us a'."

Tibbie talked on incessantly until her task was done and the
 corpse orderly disposed under a clean white sheet, where it lay
 like nothing else on this earth, so shapely, still, and cold. Then
 she lighted several wax tapers and set them about the room,
 and left Jacky to watch while she went to get some tea in the
 kitchen; Jacky bade her not stay to gossip with Martha over
 this refreshment, because she wanted to be free to go and com-
 fort Margaret, who was all this time alone. Tibbie promised
 speedy return, and shutting the door scrupulously after her crept
 down stairs; when she was gone Jacky stood a minute or two
 gazing at the statuesque outline under the sheet, and then sit-
 ting down at the foot of the bed with her back towards it, she
 began to chant a monotonous lyke-wake dirge, gently rocking
 her person to and fro in time to the dreary measure. Margaret
 pressing her baby in her arms shuddered as its notes penetrated
 to the solitude where she sat weeping in the parlour.

1.

"This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
 Every nighte an' alle:
 Fire an' sleet an' candle light,
 An' Christe receive thy saule.

2.

"When thou from hence away art paste,
 Every nighte, an' alle;
 To Whinnymuir thou comest at laste,
 An' Christe receive thy saule.

3.

"If ever thou gavest hosen or shoon,
Every nighte an' alle;
Sit thee doun an' put them on,
An' Christe receive thy saule.

4.

"If hosen an' shoon thou never gavest nane,
Every nighte an' alle;
The whinnes shall pricke thee to the bare bane,
An' Christe receive thy saule.

5.

"From Whinnymuir when thou mayst passe,
Every nighte an' alle;
To Brigg o' Dread though comest at laste,
An' Christe receive thy saule.

6.

"If ever thou gavest meat or drinke
Every nighte an' alle;
The fire shall never make thee shrinke,
An' Christe receive thy saule.

7.

"From Brigg o' Dread when thou mayst passe
Every nighte an' alle;
To purgatory fire thou comest at laste,
An' Christe receive thy saule.

8.

"If meat or drinke thou never gavest nane,
Every nighte an' alle;
The fire will burn thee to the bare bane,
An' Christe receive thy saule.

9.

"This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
Every nighte an' alle;
Fire an' sleet an' candle light,
An' Christe receive thy saule!"

Jacky's voice rose in tone as the dirge progressed, and it was not until she came to the end of it that she was sensible of a gentle knocking at the door. On opening it she found Margaret standing outside with the child in her arms. She had ceased crying, and looked pale and frightened. "Will you come in an' see your father, my bairn?" asked the servant tenderly.

"No, no—Jacky, I dare not stay by myself downstairs, come

and be with me," was the hurried reply. Tibbie Ryder was just returning upstairs, and so to her the vigil was relinquished, and Margaret went with Jacky to her bedroom, where Martha was waiting to undress the baby. When Margaret gave it up, she sat down by the fire and sank into a dreary melancholy. Sorrow had trodden quickly on the heels of sorrow, and this last calamity had beaten down her self-sustainment. Turn her thoughts where she would, every place seemed equally blank of consolation: she did not dare to *think*; her mind was passive as her body. Jacky tried to rouse her by turning her attention to the little one, but not with much success; her heart ached too sorely for any balm to heal it yet.

"Oh, Jacky, I am very miserable!" cried she, and then broke out again into a passion of weeping.

Jacky encircled her with her arms, and laid the throbbing head upon her bosom. "Think, bairn, *think* that he's gotten rest," said she, as the best comfort she could offer. "In the world we sal' ha' tribulation, but in heaven we sal' ha' peace!" Presently Margaret's sobs grew less violent, and she hushed them altogether when the baby was laid in the cot. She knelt down beside it, and seemed to pray—she could not but pray when every pang in her soul was a plea to God for his succouring help. Upon her knees, bending over her child, Mrs. Joan Clervaux found her when she arrived. She had dreaded entering her presence, and was astonished at her composure: a quivering lip, a dim glance met her, indeed, but for the present passionate grief was exhausted: her stillness was almost apathetic. Jacky and Martha stole from the room, and left them to themselves. They did not talk much, but Margaret sat by the cot and Mrs. Joan opposite to her, and when they did speak it was of the little one.

"He is all I have now," Margaret said once, regarding the unconscious face with an enthusiasm of love.

"Not quite all, Gipsy—I am your friend still, am I not? And let us have hope in the future—there is reunion in heaven, if there be sorrowful partings on earth. My dear love, I will not think but that there will be reunion *here* for you and Rupert—there is a long lifetime before both of you: you will come together again before you die!"

Margaret shook her head. The *now* was stronger with her than any possible future. Hope for the present had hid her face from her altogether.

CHAPTER LXIII.

BEREAVED.

WHILE Sylvan Holt lay dead at the Grange, Mr. Meddowes arrived, and took upon himself the arrangement of everything. Mrs. Joan Clervaux did not quit the house, but remained with her favourite, giving her all the consolation and support she was capable of receiving. It was a bitterly cold afternoon when the funeral took place, but no persuasion could keep Margaret away. She had herself indicated the spot where she desired her father should lie, saying, that there also, when her time came, she would be buried. The grave was made on the southern slope of the hill which the ancient church of Beckford crowned. No dishonoured, up-heaped place was this, but a garden of graves, where the sun shone, and the storm beat as freely as on the open moors and fells. There was an air of peacefulness about it always, for it lay somewhat remote from the village, and travellers on the opposite side of the dale could see its white monumental stones gleaming on the hillside miles away.

A crowd of village folk had gathered, as usual, to witness the funeral, but the only mourners who followed it were Margaret, Mrs. Joan Clervaux, Mr. Meddowes, and Jacky. There was a keen wind blowing that afternoon, and the earth was iron-bound in a black frost. The early December twilight fell while they were still in the church, and all was indistinct by the time the coffin was lowered into the grave. There was no sound of weeping to drown the voice of the minister; it seemed that the dead man had not won much love; in only one heart did his memory live affectionately, and that heart held its passionate suffering in check amidst idle, curious gazers. The darkness gathered, and the ceremony drew to an end; then Margaret wept softly, but not until Mrs. Joan would have led her away from the grave, did she forget herself and cry out, "Oh, no, no! it is so cruel to leave him lying here alone: father! father!"

"Poor thing, poor young thing!" said Tibbie Ryder, solemnly, to one of her cronies; "he was a hard man, but he loved her—that he did."

Mr. Wilmot approached, and attempted to say a few words to Margaret, but she took no notice, and Mrs. Joan waved him aside. For a few minutes longer she suffered her to kneel by the grave, and then with a gentle force, but without speaking, she raised her up.

"Take me home to Oakfield with you, Mrs. Joan; I dare not go back to the loneliness of Wildwood," said Margaret, clinging to her hand.

"My love, that is what I wish: we shall find Martha there with the baby when we arrive. Come," and, with a last shuddering glance at the grave, which the clerk and sexton were now filling in, Margaret turned away and entered the carriage. Jacky was summoned to follow, as she would be of more comfort to her young mistress, and could take better care of the child than any one else. Mr. Meddowes returned to Wildwood, where he proposed to stay—little as he liked it—until Sylvan Holt's affairs were settled.

The room that Margaret had occasionally occupied as a girl, had been made ready for her, and thither she was taken on arriving at Oakfield. Mrs. Joan sat down by the fire, and held the baby, while Jacky and Martha undressed their mistress. It was most sad and pitiable to see her white face, and the tears rolling silently down her cheeks. She seemed no longer to have strength left for violent sorrow, and was too apathetic even to cheer up when the baby was put into her arms.

"I am tired; I have not slept for many nights," said she; as if her worn-down quietude needed some excuse. "I must lie down."

This seemed the best plan, so they got her to bed; but even when her head was on the pillow, her wakeful eyes did not close, and when Jacky would have dropped the curtain to exclude the light she bade her desist, saying she liked to see the fire. She was presently induced to swallow some nourishment, and when the servants went out, Mrs. Joan took up her post of watcher.

Margaret seemed to be turning some sorrowful thought over in her mind, and at last she spoke:

"Oh! Mrs. Joan, I do wish Rupert were here! How little he thinks what has happened! It may be many months before he hears of my father's death."

Mrs. Joan saw she desired to talk of her husband, and encouraged her. "How I wish now we had been reconciled,"

said she, sighing; "that would have made my anguish less intolerable. It is a calm night, is it not? Oh! Mrs. Joan, every sign of rough weather excites me to fever. I think then, shall I ever, ever see him again?"

After a while she became silent, but whenever Mrs. Joan looked at her she still saw her eyes watching the fire wearily. "I cannot sleep!" she moaned, "I cannot sleep, although I am so tired. When will this wretched aching leave me? Mrs. Joan, where is Oscar?"

"We had him shut up this morning, my love."

Margaret said no more, but turned her face to the wall; a sob now and then shook her, but except for that she might have been quietly slumbering. As the night went on the wind got up and called round the house with a voice of bitter lamentation. Margaret uttered no word, but she thought of her father in his grave, and of her husband out upon a stormy sea, until her imagination raised up pictures coloured with the vivid hues of delirious fever. She sat up in her bed, rocking her baby in her arms, while in her eyes and on her cheeks burnt the consuming fire that had entered into her veins.

Mrs. Joan was alarmed, and despatched James Groves for Dr. Macmichal. He obeyed the summons immediately, but said there was no cause for fear; nature was overwrought and must have rest, and, having administered a composing draught, he went away. What came upon Margaret at last was rather lethargy than slumber, but even in that unconscious state the tears ran down her face, and low moans of distress escaped her lips.

It was a painful night, and when the morning dawned it brought with it no change. The strain on the poor girl's feelings had been too long and severe not to have weakened her nerves of endurance; they were no more susceptible of violent pain, but they were benumbed, paralysed. It was sad to see that strong, beautiful young creature lying day after day motionless, pallid, helpless, weakly crying, weary, worn out, body and spirit. She was deaf to remonstrance, deaf to every whisper of hope. The only voice that could have penetrated into the silences of her heart was far away.

There was a time when Mrs Joan and poor distracted Jacky thought that she would die—when Margaret herself faintly imagined that this torpor was the slow approach of dissolution. It was without joy that she was one day roused to behold her-

self brought once again face to face with life. When that stern countenance refused to be ignored, she addressed herself to it with what force she had.

"Mrs. Joan, my hour is not yet," were her first coherent words; "I thought I had come to my days' end, but I perceive that it is still morning—dark—but morning. I am better. Soon I must get up and do my work and bear my pain like others."

"My darling, I am glad you are better, your eyes are clear. But you must lie still yet, for you are very weak," said Mrs. Joan.

"Where is my baby? There was not a moment when I could not see his little face—give him to me now." Jacky brought him gladly, and laid him on her bosom; Margaret had not asked for him, had hardly noticed him for days. She now gazed on his tiny features with what looked like the shadow of one of her bright smiles, and when they would have taken him away, for fear of fatiguing her, she begged to keep him a little longer.

Slowly now dawned upon her many heart-aching recollections; the events of the last year had come so swiftly, one upon another, that she had scarcely had time to pause between them, but that hurry of exquisite bliss and keen pain was gone, leaving only aching echoes to thrill her miserably as she turned her eyes to the great blank which now seemed to roll itself out before her. It is not in the time of mental and physical prostration that hope can win a hearing, and the new life which Margaret's imagination coldly realized, seemed little worth the having.

"Mrs. Joan, what do you think I ought to do when I am strong enough to leave Oakfield?" asked she, after pondering the future a long time in silence.

"Let us put off the discussion until some future time when you are better able to bear it; you cannot leave me for months yet," was the reply.

"If I knew what Rupert would approve I should do that."

"My love, Rupert's mother is here, and Cecy; will you like to see them?" Mrs. Joan said eagerly.

Margaret lay back trembling. "No, no, I cannot bear to see them yet," replied she. "But it was good of them to come."

Mrs. Joan was vexed with herself for her precipitancy, and

alarmed too when she saw the painful effect her sudden announcement had had; the tears sliding from under Margaret's closed lids, and her bosom heaving with ill-suppressed sobs. She kissed her quivering lips, but refrained from speaking, and by and by the poor girl regained her composure. For several days no further allusion was made to the presence of Mrs. Fielding at Oakfield, but one morning lying awake Margaret heard her whispering outside the door with Cecy and Mrs. Joan. She roused herself with a strong effort, and when Mrs. Joan came in she said calmly, "Rupert's mother is still here; I heard her voice and Cecy's just now. I am able to rise if Jacky will come, and then I shall see them. I would not have them think me ungrateful."

Mrs. Joan remonstrated with her patient about wishing to leave her bed, but Margaret was resolute. "I am weary of lying here, and besides I am much, much better. I have no more physical suffering, and I long to see the sun again: what a blithe morning it looks out of doors, what a cheery blue sky!" She was trying to put a veil on her feelings, and to assume some of her old self; but Mrs. Joan was not so easily hoodwinked; she read the evidence of her internal struggle in glittering eyes and unsteady voice.

"Wait for a few days longer, Gipsy," pleaded she, "don't seek to prove your strength too soon, lest it should break down again."

"My mind has woke up now, and urges me too vehemently to suffer me to be quiet any longer here—let me get back to my life, such as it is," replied Margaret wearily. "I owe a duty to Rupert's people, since I bear his name and am the mother of his child, though he has left me. Little Alick must have friends amongst his father's kindred, let what will become of me."

Mrs. Joan looked at her sorrowfully, but, perceiving that she did not overrate her improvement, Jacky was summoned, and with many a rest between, her young mistress was dressed in the heavy crape robes that she had worn at her father's funeral.

"My poor father!" said she. "Oh! Jacky, who will ever love me as he did? We shall have a strange home now, you, and I, and baby."

"Eh! bairn, shall we! It's a sair warld to live in, an' I care not for ane how sune I'm quit on it;" was the servant's response.

When Margaret was dressed, she desired to be left alone for a short time, so Mrs. Joan withdrew to apprise her guests that she was coming down, and presently she appeared. She had lost flesh and colour; her eyes looked larger and her brow more ample, but no waste or pallor could destroy the clear delicate outline of her features, or dim the sweetness and beauty of her countenance. Her abundant curls were smoothed into rich waved braid, and knotted at the back of the head—a change that altered her girlish expression much without detracting from her loveliness. She had great self-command in some circumstances, and though her weakness was against her, she exercised it now. Her step was unsteady, and her mouth quivered irrepressibly, neither could she speak at first, but there was no outbreak of sorrow, such as Mrs. Joan had dreaded.

Mrs. Fielding's eyes filled, and Cecy was fain to hide hers for ever so long on Margaret's shoulder; but if there was one thing in the meeting more remarkable than another it was its silence and self-restraint. Cecy only said: "Oh, Margaret, I am so sorry for you!" and Mrs. Fielding concealed her emotion in busily arranging the sofa cushions for her daughter-in-law to lie down. Margaret's heart beat hard and fast for long after this quiet meeting: but the great step was taken—she had met her husband's kindred and found them friends. The first time the door was opened, in stalked Oscar, and presently Jacky appeared with the child, whom Cecy undertook to nurse. Amongst them the morning passed over very stilly, and without any recurrence to the great recent troubles: it seemed tacitly agreed that there should be silence on that subject for some time to come.

CHAPTER LXIV.

GOOD COUNSEL.

THE Laird and his wife were both of opinion that Margaret, considering her youth and wholly unprotected condition, ought to make her home at Manselands—at least, until her husband's wishes should be known; but when this proposal was made to

Mrs. Joan Clervaux she pleaded so earnestly that it might not be named to her favourite, that for the present it was let alone, and Margaret continued at Oakfield. When Mrs. Fielding returned to Scotland, Cecy was left behind as a cheerful companion for her sister, who regarded her with daily increasing affection. Many warnings had the open-hearted Cecy received from her mother, about how she suffered herself to approach the delicate theme of her brother's separation from his wife, but one day when they were taking their first walk beyond the limits of the Oakfield grounds, her discretion suddenly gave way before her anxious desire to officiate as a peace-maker, and she plunged directly into the heart of the matter—not, it must be allowed, however, without seeing that the moment was propitious.

It was a fresh morning early in April—clear, sunshiny, warmer than the season generally is in Mirkdale—such a morning as insensibly influences the spirits and revives our drooping courage. The world brightens under its aspect, and things that seemed impossible before lose in its light half the phantom difficulties that surrounded them. Margaret's wholesome heart responded to its benign and gracious power, which dissipated the dark vapours that had clouded it so long; her eyes lifted themselves to the spring sky, instead of dwelling on the ground, the young blood flushed her cheek with a new rose, her step unconsciously quickened into elasticity. Cecy saw these signs, and spoke.

"If I were you, now that you are strong again, I should take baby and Jacky and go out to join Rupert in India," said she, with admirable directness. Margaret started, coloured, looked eager, but said nothing. "I should, indeed; because it is the right thing to do," added her sister; "let us sit down here in the sunshine and talk about it."

They were close by Greatorex Mills, and so they took their places on the stone bench where Margaret and Martin Carew had sat on the morning of that day, memorable in both their lives, when Colonel Fielding had first crossed their path. The yellow primroses, the wild strawberry blossoms, and the white daisies were starring the verdant bank, and the huge water-wheel was flashing round in the sunshine, just as they had done then; as in a moment of time, all Margaret's life, from that hour to this, stood revealed before her; but obedient to Cecy's wish she sat down, and listened and talked.

"I want to do you good; I want to make you hear reason," said Cecy, peering affectionately into her companion's face.

"You are a kind little Cecy, but you do not know——" began Margaret, in agitation.

"Yes, I do; I know everything," interrupted Cecy; "I know Rupert is miserable without you, and I know you are miserable without Rupert, so the only sensible thing in the world is for you to be together. I saw him in London, and found out where the mischief lay; if nobody had meddled, all would have come right. He took fire at a letter from Wildwood, which he thought you had dictated—but it is folly to revive that. I am sure you will do what you ought, and that is, go out to him in India."

"Not unless he desire it; and he scarcely can. Listen, Cecy, while I tell you," and Margaret detailed what had happened at Marseilles, without observing any of the gathering signs of wrath on Cecy's face.

"Margaret, I could almost be angry with you for suspecting our Rupert of such a piece of cold-hearted, cruel conduct," cried she; "if he had seen you, or if he had understood Sandy, it is my belief that he would be in England now. You don't know, but I do, for he told me, what he felt at leaving you. I was his favourite sister, and I would not let him hide his heart from me when he was so unhappy."

Margaret sighed, but she smiled too: "I should like to believe you, Cecy, but how can I?" said she.

"You can very well if you will look further back—if you will look to the time at Manselands and to the time we were at Abbeymeads. It is always well to be candid, Margaret, and I have found out since that I was mistaken there. When we are very sorry for any one we long to be kind to them, and that was how it was with Rupert and Frances; he was so sorry for her, but he did not *love* her like you."

"I have heard him say so when such words sounded truer than they sound now, Cecy."

"But he *does* love you, Margaret: you believe that?"

"No—I cannot tell what to believe. If he did, why could he not come back to me at Wildwood, and compel me to hear the truth? You are deceived, Cecy, you do not understand——"

"I am not deceived, Margaret; I know my brother too well for that. He is proud, and that letter stung him to the quick,

but don't think he suffered or suffers one whit less than yourself, for it would not be true."

"If I felt *that*, it would be easy for me to stoop," replied Margaret, with a faint blush trembling on her cheek.

"You say so! I knew it, I knew it all along; I told him 'Depend upon it she thinks you don't care for her!' and what was his answer—'Cecy, my very soul cleaves to her, but I cannot brave her contemptuous anger.' Ah! I wish he were here now to plead his own cause!"

Margaret shook from head to foot. "If," said she, patiently, "if Rupert and I have erred towards each other through a foolish distrust, it may be given to some distant future to right us yet."

"Not to a *distant* future!" replied Cecy, exultant. "If Rupert could know now what you have admitted he would long to annihilate time and space this very moment, to be near you and to repair what he has done wrong. But he will have to wait; and I hope—yes, I hope that he will see it his duty to do a little repentance." Cecy had failed to realize all the pains of separation, but she could imagine the joy of re-union vividly enough, and she spoke in a light pleasant way, the natural effluence of her own sunny temper.

"Let us go home, Cecy; I know not yet whether you have done me most harm or most good!" said Margaret.

"Most good, I'm sure," persisted Cecy; "you have the noblest heart breathing, and I know it forgives Rupert now—but it shall, it must have its reward in his devoted affection; a dead woman is no rival for your living beauty. I will not let you raise ghosts again out of that perished past; say good-bye to it once for all, and then write to Rupert, like the dear, good, loving wife you were always meant to be."

"Cecy, you are a little enthusiast!" returned Margaret; and they went home in silence full of better thoughts than either had brought out with her. Cecy's admirable straightforwardness of speech had wrought on her sister marvellously.

As they drew near the Oakfield gate, Mistress Tibbie Ryder was issuing therefrom; she stood still till they came up. "There's Indian letters for Mrs. Joan and for you too, Miss Marg'ret, an' I hope it's good news o' t' Colonel," said she.

Margaret was off like an arrow from the bow, and Mrs. Joan meeting her at the door, folded her in a close embrace, and said,

"I see how it will be; I am to be bereaved of both my children! First Martin, and now Gipsy!"

"Give me your letter!" cried Margaret, and snatching it hastily she fled to her room and read it on her knees.

That dear letter! what words of repentant, remorseful love, what precious, golden assurances, true, true to every sense even on the cold inanimate paper; she believed them all and took comfort and peace once more into her bosom.

"Come out, Margaret; I want to share with you," presently said Cecy, standing by her door; she came out, the dews of youth, the light of love shining on her sweet face.

"I shall take the baby and Jacky to go to Rupert by the first ship," said she, "here is my letter."

"Let me read it."

"No; it is all my own; but I'll tell you a little bit of it. Oh, Cecy, I am so happy."

"I see you are; you don't look like the same creature; you are transformed. Here is Mrs. Joan, tell her too."

"No need; did I not hear the ring of Gipsy's voice downstairs? Oscar heard it and pricked his ears. We knew what had come to pass both of us. When you are a little calmer I have tidings of Martin for you as well."

Poor Martin; I am afraid he had but a very divided interest accorded to his letter, for great happiness, like great sorrow, is selfish too—and Margaret had no other thought now except for Rupert.

No one gainsaid her resolution, but everything was done to advance it. Mr. Meddowes was formally reinstated in the regency of Abbeymeads, Mrs. Unwin promised her patronage to the orphan-house at Brightebanke, Wildwood farm was let, and Oscar confided to the charge of Mrs. Joan Clervaux.

Margaret's last act was to plant a young cedar on her father's grave, otherwise undistinguished from the green mounds that covered the village poor; then she took a long leave of her friends, and turned her back on Wildwood for many many years.

CHAPTER LXV.

TIME FLIES.

TIME flies. It is nearly twenty years since Margaret and her little retinue sailed in the "Firefly." This retinue consisted, first, of Jacky in charge of the baby—of Jacky, who packed her bundle to go half round the world with a phlegmatic composure that would have done credit to the experienced Katie out of Beckford, who had married the rampagious horse soldier in the days of the Peninsular war—and, second, of Poet Patrick Blunte. Patrick's oriental romance had encountered obstacles, his vanity had received a shock, and his common-sense an awakener; he had undergone a preparatory course of training, was going out to join the civil service as an underwriter or something of that kind; and, as he was very good-natured, Margaret was very glad to have him as a sort of protector; and he, far from undervaluing his office, was proud of it, and came out surprisingly in the way of amusement. Patrick had abundance of natural cleverness when he got off his stilts, which hitherto had only elevated him into ridicule, and given him an ungainly embarrassed position in life. He developed some of his sister Phemie's fun in his new circumstances, and was really far happier than when supporting the tiresome rôle of unappreciated poet: not that he abandoned his pen—far from it; in the intervals of studying his Hindoostanee grammar, he wrote sonnets; the voyage produced nearly a carpet-bag full, many of which were admirable as descriptive pieces. A selection from them has recently been published with some success as the leisure trifling of a judge at Madras.

Jacky was an immense favourite on board, as was only to be expected. The stories she told, the questions she asked, the ingenious and clever kindnesses she did were wonderful; but her astonishment at everything she saw was more wonderful still. The baby grew and throve as it had every reason to do; and Margaret, in the intervals of writing letters home, keeping a journal, playing with Alick, and humouring Patrick's inspirations, made the acquaintance and gained the friendship of Captain and Mrs. Macfarlane, who were going out to join their

regiment—that regiment being Colonel Fielding's. Mrs. Macfarlane was an immense talker, and had known the Colonel ever since he and her own husband, then beardless ensigns, had belonged to it. She had a hundred anecdotes of the Colonel's bravery, the Colonel's generosity, the Colonel's moderation in success, resolution in danger, and constancy in reverse; and anybody who knows how a good woman loves to hear her husband glorified will be at no loss for a reason why Margaret liked the rather boisterous Mrs. Macfarlane better than any other lady amongst the many on board the "Firefly." Their intimacy, cemented during the tedium of the voyage by many a mutual kindness, was destined to continue as long as Margaret stayed in India.

"Margaret's campaigns," for so her husband calls them, have formed the theme of many a story to their children since, but they would be too long and too disastrous a tale to be told here. She joined her husband just before the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan, and was with him through that dreary catastrophe; Jacky also clinging faithfully to their fortunes in a period of greatest misery and distress. Captain Knox's regiment was amongst those sent as reinforcements to get the scattered Europeans through the passes of the enemy's country; and it was after the deadly retreat of the Khyber Pass, that Jacky encountered and succoured—as only that woman of many resources could have succoured—a gigantic wounded Scotchman in the Captain's company. Will it be believed of Jacky, after her fierce tirade against Katie out of Beckford, that at the first opportunity she *married* this rampaging person? She did—and so much for the consistency of woman! But though she had married him, and was now Mrs. Sergeant MacFinn, it by no means followed that she should forsake Margaret, her first love; and when the exigencies of circumstances compelled her to choose between them, she armed herself with the sturdy Alick, told MacFinn for his consolation that he'd be sure to turn up again somewhere and somehow, and followed the steps of her "bonnie;" a loose principle of conjugal morality which showed that Jacky's military education had made considerable progress.

It was during the war in Scinde that Martin Carew's regiment and Colonel Fielding's made a campaign together. From the battle of Meanee they both escaped unhurt, but at Hyderabad Martin "paid his footing," *i. e.*, received his first

wound ; a very severe one it was, and disabled him for many months. When this conflict was over the Colonel and Margaret went to the hills, and joined Captain Knox and Amy. Here Margaret's second son was born and christened, by Jacky's special desire, Rupert Meanee.

Poor little Rupert Meanee died and was buried on the Neilgherry hills, but three years after ; he was never strong like Alick, but Jacky always persisted that he was prettier and cleverer, and Margaret grieved sorely for her little angel child. They would probably have returned to England after this event, but the Sikh war breaking out, Colonel Fielding again headed his regiment. He went up with reinforcements, Martin Carew again falling in with him. They fought side by side at Ferozeshah, where Martin got a trifling scratch, but nothing sufficient to prevent him distinguishing himself at Aliwal or at Sobraon, where he received a bad wound and won his company. The Colonel also received a hurt which will remind him of its existence as long as he lives. After Sobraon, Sergeant MacFinn turned up, as Jacky had said he would, but much the worse for war and wear. He had been hit whenever he went out, and having lost an arm his fighting days were over ; Jacky affectionately assured him that he had more lives than a cat, and henceforward took him under charge. When poor Sandy died of a fever, the Sergeant was elected to the post of Colonel Fielding's servant, but his Briareus wife did most of his duties.

What a blessed comfort that Jacky was ! what an inexhaustible fount of strength, good-humour, and devotion ! She would have died cheerfully either with or for her mistress, the boy, and the Colonel, if need had been ; and 'tis believed that once she did save their lives by a prompt action of her own, to which, however, she always stops allusion by a peevish—"Whisht, then, he was only a black body !"

This occurred during the early part of her military adventures in the lamentable retreat of the Europeans from Affghanistan, when hundreds perished miserably by cold, hunger, and the sword. Margaret's conscience is less tender ; her accomplishments as a markswoman, an indefatigable walker, and a hard rider, came into effective use ; and to the second of these the preservation of herself and her child was owing more than once. Her indomitable courage, her fortitude, her powers of endurance were wonderful ; it seemed as if her hardy training

had been carried through purposely to fit her for what she had to undergo in later life. Then her high heart, her hopeful spirit, never failed; and the Colonel will always remember that speech of hers, made when they were lying in perilous concealment during that retreat—"Oh, Rupert, hunger and cold are hard to bear, and it is sad to see Alick suffer, but I have known days more wretched and nights more dreary than these." Which was very true, for she was then sharing and ameliorating the sufferings of those she loved. Jacky said she had been born for a soldier's wife, and that if she had stayed at Wildwood or Abbeymeads all her life, they should never have known what was in her—an observation which might also be applied to the servant herself.

It happened that after his wound at Sobraon, Martin Carew fell into Jacky's hands to nurse. Margaret also attended on him, and the young fellow, in the delirium of fever, betrayed the unspoken passion of his youth. It was when only Margaret was with him; he spoke of them sitting down by the stream at Greatorex Mills and watching the waterwheel flash round in the sunshine, and then he said, as if making a melancholy confession to himself, "Gipsy does not love me; Gipsy does not love me!" Perhaps he wondered when he recovered why Margaret's manner was rather lofty and severe for a little while, but to this day he does not know that she has his secret: he never will know it.

There was many a talk about going back to Europe, but while hard blows were the fashion of the time Colonel Fielding said his place was where they were being dealt, but when the war was at an end he listened complacently to the visions of rest which Margaret, whose heart yearned for England, never wearied of bringing before him. By and by there came a day when Jacky tossed up her turban, as holiday-going boys toss up their caps, and shrieked frantically—

"Hame, hame, hame! oh, hame fain wad I be!
Oh! hame, hame, hame, to my ain countrie!
When the flower is i' the bud, an' the leaf is on the tree,
The lark sal sing me hame to my ain countrie.
Hame, hame, hame! oh, hame fain wad I be!
Oh, hame, hame, hame, to my ain countrie!"

And then she seized upon Alick and kissed him rapturously, and on that young gentleman's requesting to know the reason

of her wild behaviour, she picked up the gaudy Madras handkerchief composing her head-dress, wiped her eyes with it, put it on again, and said with hysteric solemnity, "Oh, it's hame, hame, hame!—Alick, my man, t' marching order's given; we are going back to Wildwood, to Oscar, Mrs. Joan, and all of 'em!"

Alick, who was a boy of a naturally rejoicing spirit, and whom Jacky had taught to consider Wildwood as a Paradise of delights, cried "Hurra" twice, and then, with a considerateness beyond his years, asked if Sergeant MacFinn was going home too, to which Jacky replied, "Sergeant MacFinn be dished!" But Sergeant MacFinn was not dished; or if he were, it was in the ship that took him and his spouse home to the lodge at Abbeymeads, where she dishes him daily much better probably than he was ever dished before. When the family goes to London in the spring, Jacky and the Sergeant depart for Wildwood, where they stay over the shooting season, during which the Colonel and Margaret always go down to Mirkdale for a month or six weeks, and where the old servant is a personage of paramount importance—exceeding even that of the venerable Robbie Clarke.

Margaret's third son was born at sea during a stormy night, when it was feared that the vessel might be lost—which is, perhaps, one reason why the little lad, who came safely out of that peril, and who is of a remarkably brave spirit, declares that he will wear the blue jacket and the Queen's button when he is big enough. His mother already, in her mind's eye, sees one of his small mottled legs replaced by a wooden stump, and a black patch covering his right visual organ, in the times when he shall be called Admiral Fielding, fifty years hence. Martin Carew—Major Carew—who came over in the same ship, stood godfather for him, and gave him his name. He had a great variety of nurses on board, being considered a remarkable character in himself, and it is not improbable that some of those who dandled the future admiral may one day serve under him. He is nine years younger than his brother Alick, who loves him, in a superior but tender way, as something infinitely smaller and weaker than himself; Alick also remembers poor little Rupert Meanee—Margaret leaves nothing behind in India so dear as that tiny grave on the Neilgherry hills.

And thus this set of people, who had borne hunger and thirst

danger, difficulty, and distress in each other's company, came safely home again, united by a bond of love and esteem and intimate knowledge, such as suffering knits—a bond stronger to bear the fret and monotony of quiet coming years, than any that mere pleasure-seeking or easy living ever wove.

As the ship neared the shore, those who were gathered there to receive their friends saw one group in particular, consisting of a grey-haired, grey-moustached, brown-visaged soldier, on whose arm leant a beautiful spirited-looking woman, who held a tall, bright-eyed, curly-headed boy by the hand. Close by was a second female who had the tanned and sturdy aspect of a disguised drummer, but who vindicated the claims of her sex by the style in which she carried the baby; behind her was a grim red-bearded soldier of most rampagious appearance—to wit, Sergeant MacFinn; and a pace or two off a dark gentleman, younger than the first, but full as tall, and of a very similar air and figure.

The party on deck was equally attracted by a cluster on shore; there was that brave old lady Mrs. Joan Clervaux, and lying at her feet—for it was a warm summer day—tired, perhaps, and feeling mournfully that he was not so young as he had been, was Margaret's faithful companion, Oscar. Alick cried out his name when he saw the dog, for his mother had talked about and drawn his picture a hundred times, so that the lad knew him immediately. The Laird was there with Cecy—Cecy as pretty as ever, but not married yet; she had not, it seemed, met with any one so good or so nice as Rupert, so she stayed with her parents at home. At the very first glimpse of her Margaret took an idea into her head, but what that idea was must wait awhile for its development.

Jacky's enthusiasm was so wild that she was lost for some time in the confusion of landing, and was recovered at the moment when she was about to set off to walk home to Wildwood with the baby alone: when remonstrated with, all she said was, "Ha' we ne'er tramped bairns on our backs afore? marry? we ha'. What we ha' done once, we may do again; Jacky's no' nesh." And whenever the old servant found herself hampered by "t' genteel ways" of home she always reverted to some queer expedient of her military life to prove how easy it was to do without them where the observance was inconvenient.

And the whole party travelled to Abbeymeads, where Mrs. Fielding awaited them. It was a very happy coming home.

CHAPTER LXVI.

HOME!

It was a very happy coming home! Colonel Fielding and Margaret would not part with any of their guests for several weeks: they were all friends, dear friends, where could they be better than together? Mrs. Joan Clervaux rejoiced over her recovered children as truly, as warmly, as if she had been indeed their mother. Poor Martin's wounds, badges of bravery and honour, which had long and often disquieted her alone, were now only elements in her pride in him; and Margaret's matronly beauty and dignity filled up the picture of change that she had daily drawn as operating in her wild darling Gipsy.

It was not clear at first that Oscar recognized his former companion; he did not answer to her call, and followed in preference Mrs. Joan Clervaux, under whose care he had been left; but in a few days he attached himself to Alick, and presently after, he would come to Margaret and lie down at her feet, as if the remembrance of the old alliance had returned to him, and he desired its renewal. It was renewed, and lasts still; Oscar, a truly venerable dog, suns himself on the terrace at Abbeymeads to this day, and sometimes condescends to play at being a horse with the future Admiral Martin.

Margaret soon after her return to England came out in a new character—as a match-maker. The idea that came into her head as she greeted Cecy at Southampton, was, that she would make the dearest wife in the world for Major Carew. She named it to Mrs. Joan, who, blushing beautifully for so old a lady, confessed that she had already made the suggestion to her dear nephew, and that his answer was, he had no time to think about marrying or anything of the kind. Margaret blushed too, for the idea was such a hopeful one that she would not consent to relinquish it. She patiently abided her time.

Cecy was a very sweet, lovable woman, and perhaps Major Carew interested her, but at all events she was never more sweet and lovable than in his company; and as she stayed the summer at Abbeymeads, then went to Wildwood, and he

visited Manselands with Mrs. Joan about Christmas time, his opportunities of studying her were many. The longer Cecy was known, the more cordially was she appreciated, and before they had been a year in England, the Major found spare time on his hands to fall in love—the proximate result of which was a marriage, which is a happy one in every sense.

When Margaret went to Wildwood the first autumn with the Colonel and their boys, one of the first ladies who called upon her was the second Mrs. Wilmot—*ci-devant* Miss Bell Rowley. The poor Irish lady had died suddenly, and the brisk little rector, perhaps because he was partial to tongue, had espoused the Mirkdale Amazon during the fit of despair which followed the simultaneous marriages of two of her youngest sisters. Bell was grown preposterously stout; she had a house full of children, and a heart full of complaints. She told Margaret, with tears in her eyes, that she had never mounted a horse since the day she married the rector, and that from the bottom of her heart she envied Miss Bleete, who was an old maid and a huntress still. She had given up boasting almost, and neither Colonel Fielding nor Major Carew recognized her.

Tibbie Ryder had made up her last mail, busked her last bride, streaked her last corpse, and taken up her last lodging on the slope of Beckford church hill, before Margaret came home; a new postmistress reigns in her stead; who is a stupid honest body, ignorant of the powers of kettle-spout, red-hot needle, and her neighbours' affairs. There is consequently much less gossip afloat than formerly, though to the stock legends there is another added—How Sylvan Holt lived and died—but Jacky does not include this in her repertoire.

Sylvan Holt's grave is green, and Margaret knows it by the young cedar she planted there before she left England, but according to his own request there is no stone there, nor anything to tell the stranger or the future who lies below.

CHAPTER LXVII.

NOW.

It is seven years since Colonel Fielding and his wife came home. Alick is a tall, handsome fellow now, who gives his mother his arm in a manly way—and the devotion he has for her is beautiful. She has only those two sons, Alick and Martin—Martin a home darling still, Alick already pluming himself for his first flight into the world. He will be a soldier like his father, and like his father he will draw his sword in troublous times. If Margaret had had a daughter she would have trained her up in all gentle and womanly virtues; but she was well fitted to be the mother of sons. It is the boys' opinion that she knows everything about beasts, birds, trees, and sports that can be known. She has been their companion ever since they were born; and from what Alick has seen and known of her, he conceives a lofty and pure idea of women which she prays he may ever retain.

The life she leads is a truly noble one. King Solomon has drawn a portrait of a virtuous woman, whose price, he says, is above rubies—some of her traits, her best traits, are Margaret's.

"The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her; she will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth in wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her."

Mr. Meddowes, an old man now, says she has redeemed her father's neglect of his property. Wealth could not have fallen into more conscientious hands than Colonel Fielding's and hers; and it seems that there is a blessing on their good deeds.

Many a miserable family, rescued from lowest poverty and vice, has found the way smoothed to a new colony and a new life by their bounty; many a poor, half-baffled striver with hard times and his own genius has found his cake and cruse replenished week by week until the battle was won, or he had

passed forward to that land where striving ceases for ever more.

In her desire that the children should be men good and useful in their generation, Margaret has caused them to become acquainted with every man, woman, and child on the estates that they will one day share, so that there may be amongst them that close personal interest which the abstract sense of duty between landlord and tenant but coldly supplies. They have been brought up in a hardy, independent, though loving way, so that if the vicissitudes of after life bring them down to their own natural strength, courage, and ingenuity, they may live through them, and live them down with less of suffering than might otherwise fall to their share.

The endowment of Brightebanke has been made perpetual, so that one of Margaret's good deeds will live after her, may be, for ages. And now having brought her through her trials to a calm scene of life, there let us leave her, saying as some poor heart, warmed and comforted, says daily, "God bless her!"

THE END.